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AUGUST 2011

Volume 198, No. 8

# American School

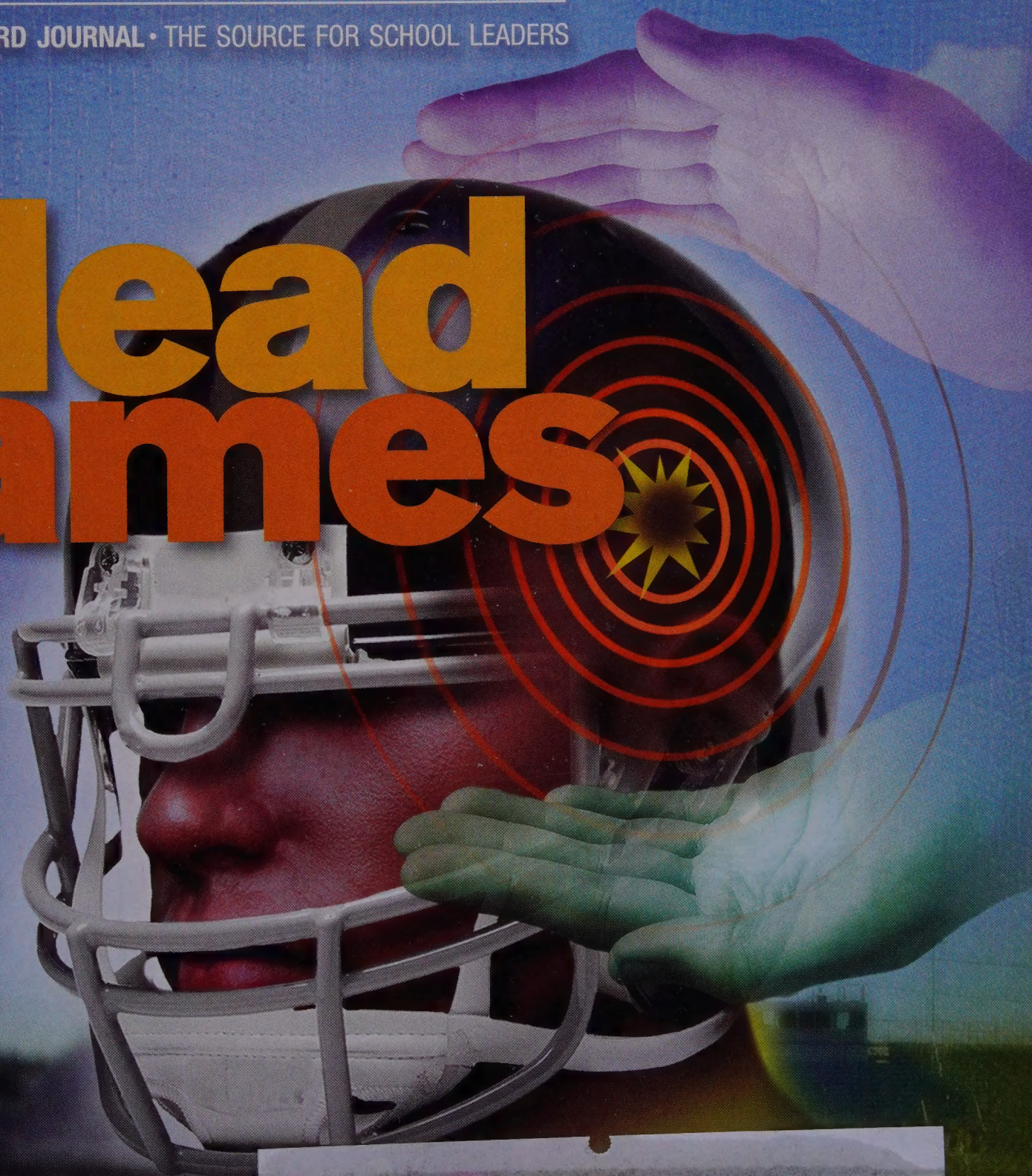
AMERICAN SCHOOL BOARD JOURNAL • THE SOURCE FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

**Inside:**

Getting relief from  
NCLB regulations

## Head Games

As more research  
about the dangers  
of concussions in  
children and youth  
surfaces, districts  
take the lead to  
protect students  
from traumatic  
brain injuries



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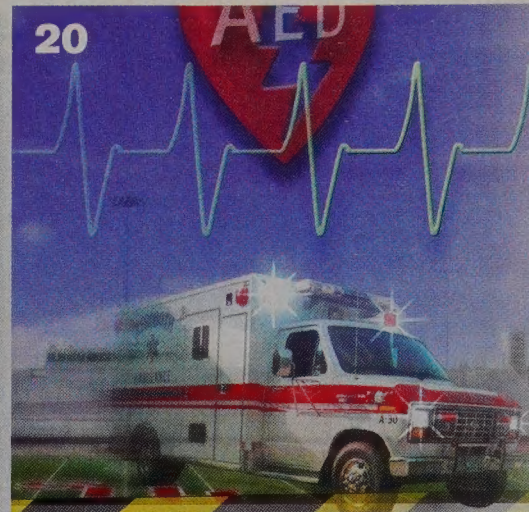
Volume 198, No. 8

Established 1891

# American School

THE SOURCE FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

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Opinions expressed by this magazine or its authors do not necessarily reflect positions of the National School Boards Association.

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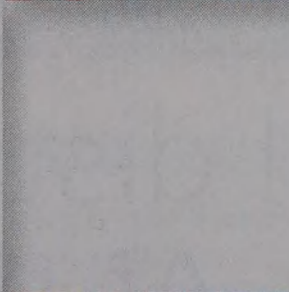
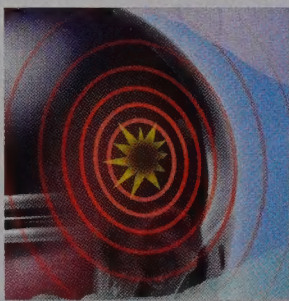
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# FROM THE EDITOR

Change Happens



Several years ago, *ASBJ* had a cover story that focused on how school board members deal with various challenges that threaten their districts. The title: “Change Happens.”

I thought of that headline as we started work on this issue, which represents a number of changes in how we present content to our readers.

The changes incorporate the best materials previously published in NSBA’s newspaper, known as *School Board News*. Immediately, you will see change reflected in our retitled opening section, which incorporates the School Board News name. The section also includes information you might have missed that has been published each weekday on the School Board News Today website (<http://schoolboardnews.nsba.org>).

Also new to the magazine are a Research column written by staff from the Center for Public Education, and a School Law column penned by members of the Council of School Attorneys.

Finally, toward the back of the magazine, we have made a couple of additional changes. The popular Adviser column now leads off our Learn More section, and we have added a new back-page essay titled The Last Word.

The Last Word will be written on alternate months by Anne Bryant, NSBA’s executive director (and *ASBJ*’s publisher), and Mary Broderick, presi-

dent of the NSBA board of directors for 2011-12. In their words, they will provide a perspective on the issues they see while traveling the country and working on behalf of school board members across the U.S.

The decision to no longer publish the print edition of *School Board News*—a newspaper sent to NSBA’s National Affiliates for almost three decades—and combine its content with the magazine is part of the financial realities all publishers face today. It’s also a reflection of the time crunch that school board members deal with, and your stated desire to find information in a centrally located place, which now is *ASBJ*.

How content is delivered has changed dramatically but, that said, the demand for up-to-the-minute news content is higher than ever. That’s one reason we created the School Board News Today website, which in turn feeds into our Facebook and Twitter pages, giving you opportunities to pick up our content from multiple sources at any time of the day or night.

In the long term, we believe these changes will add value to the magazine and strengthen our position as “The Source for School Leaders.” We welcome your feedback, and hope you will continue to read and value our content in print and online.

Until next month ...

Glenn Cook, Editor-in-Chief



# American School

AMERICAN SCHOOL BOARD JOURNAL  
THE SOURCE FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

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Fax (703) 549-6719

**Editorial** editorial@asbj.com

**Subscriptions** asbj@icnfull.com

**Advertising** advertising@nsba.org

**Letters** letter@asbj.com

**Reprint Permissions** reprint@asbj.com

**Article Submission** articles@asbj.com

Founding Publisher William George Bruce 1891-1912

*American School Board Journal (ASBJ)* is published  
monthly by the National School Boards Association.

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Joseph S. Villani, Deputy Executive Director

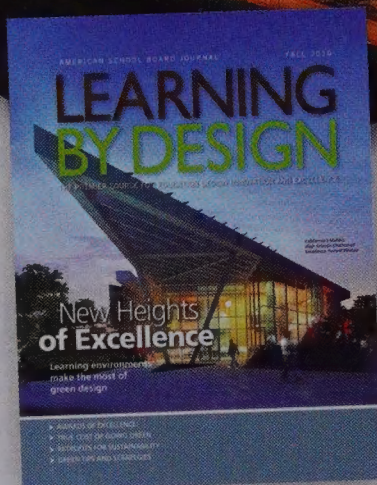
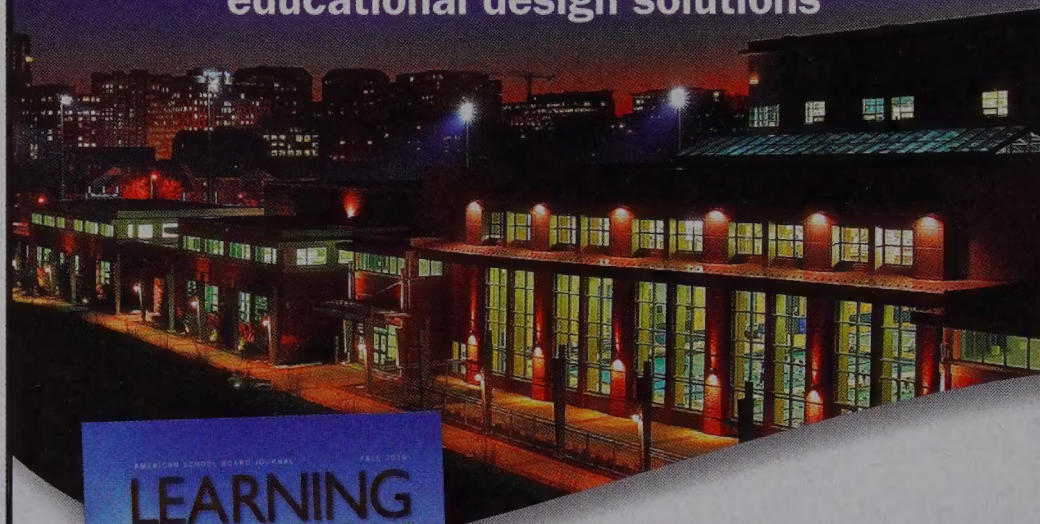
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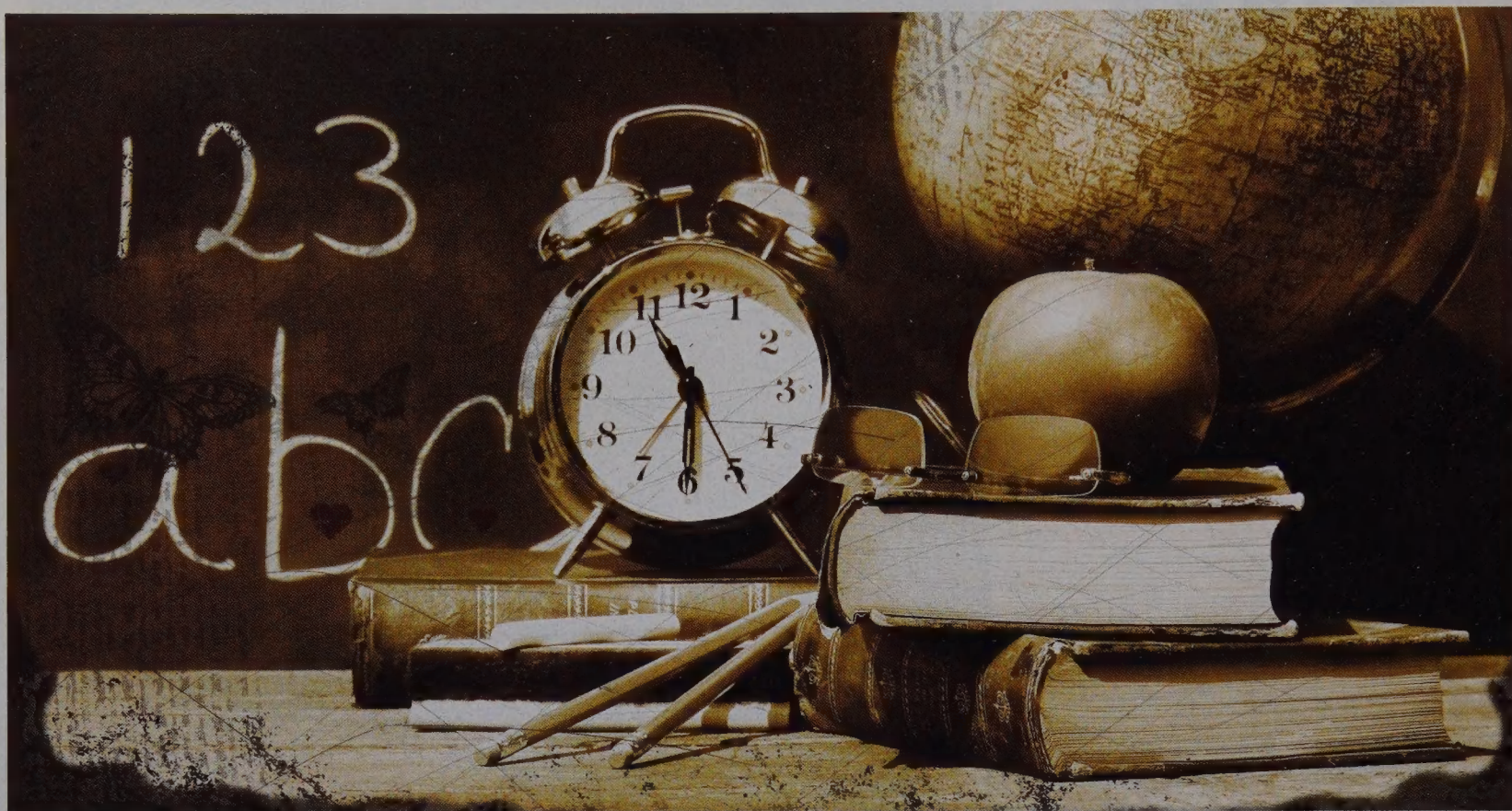
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## ON THE HILL

# Join the drive to get relief from NCLB regulations

Michael A. Resnick

**T**o its credit, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has focused national attention on the importance of every school being held accountable for raising student achievement to high academic standards. Operationally, though, the program is widely regarded by local educators and policymakers, researchers, and members of Congress as too educationally counterproductive for students and too wasteful of funds and staff time to be sustainable.

NCLB's flaws run the gamut, starting with the premise that one test on one day can fully measure student achievement, and extend to determining how schools are judged as succeed-

ing or failing. The flawed system also includes a one-size-fits-all process of interventions for schools that do not measure up, interventions that are put in place regardless of whether they are appropriate (in specific cases) or ineffective (in general).

The negative impact of NCLB is worsening as the flawed performance bar to which it holds schools accountable keeps rising regardless of the real progress that many are making. Earlier this year, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan predicted that 82 percent of the nation's schools will be identified as failing even if they are succeeding on dozens of accountability mea-

sures. All it takes is failing one measure that may involve relatively few students, and you only have to fail once to be identified.

As we go to press, Congress is not likely to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to replace NCLB prior to the opening of school. Therefore, Duncan's projected failure rate portends a real and unnecessary problem this fall for many schools, both in terms of public perception and how they may be required to utilize scarce time and money under this flawed program.

Pending reauthorization, regulatory relief from the dysfunctional burdens





### NSBA wins school health grant

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently awarded NSBA a new five-year cooperative agreement to promote Coordinated School Health (CSH) programs with school boards and administrators. NSBA has worked with the CSH model since 1990. The new project will help provide important resources for school board members and administrators, including a CSH webpage and webinars, and engage education leaders in implementing CSH programs.

### Immunity for school staff

What do school officials need to know about the legal concept of immunity and how it affects teachers and administrators? "Teacher and Administrator Immunity," a webinar sponsored by NSBA's National Affiliate program and the Office of the General Counsel, gave a quick lesson in the basic legal concept and the laws that offer protections to school staff. The webinar is archived at [www.nsba.org/webchannelna](http://www.nsba.org/webchannelna).

### Court rules on child abuse warrants

The U.S. Supreme Court, on a 7-2 vote, declined to rule on whether a warrant was required when police and a social worker entered an Oregon elementary school to interview a 9-year-old suspected victim of child abuse. In *Camreta v. Greene*, NSBA asked the high court to provide greater clarity on whether warrants are required, because schools often are asked to assist child protective services agencies and police in such investigations by allowing students to be interviewed at school. NSBA's Legal Clips has a detailed legal analysis of the case (<http://legalclips.nsba.org/?p=6721>).

### CPE videos focus on use of data

A dozen short videos from NSBA's Center for Public Education (CPE) cover a variety of public school topics, from preschool education to college readiness to teacher quality. The three- to four-minute videos are designed to be educational and make data fun. Check these out on CPE's website, [www.centerforpubliceducation.org](http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org), or the Data First website, [www.data-first.org/learning-center](http://www.data-first.org/learning-center).

of this program is needed and is needed now—before school starts.

For example, many schools will be required to set aside 20 percent of Title I funds to offer choice or tutoring services by private providers (called SES). Putting the money back into the classroom, especially when districts are being forced to slash budgets, would do more for students and the strength of their schools than either of these largely ineffective mandated interventions.

To achieve regulatory relief, NSBA has called on Congress to enact legislation and for Secretary Duncan to use his administrative authority to defer the operation of certain negative requirements of NCLB—especially dysfunctional sanctions like SES—until ESEA is reauthorized. We are working with the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) on a local school district resolution and petition drive to underscore the immediate need for deregulation.

We are pleased that Secretary Duncan has heard the concern and made the commitment to help. In developing a plan over the coming weeks, his initial thinking is to invite states to individually apply to the Department of Education (ED) for waivers in exchange for adopting certain reforms. That approach would certainly be consistent with his other initiatives—most prominently, Race to the Top (RTTT).

However, NSBA has several questions and concerns with that approach, including the following:

■ Can a state application and approval process be put in place before school starts? For requirements like SES, districts will be engaging in community outreach activities and obligating themselves to contracts with providers in the coming weeks. A sub-

sequent waiver would come too late under this approach.

■ If a state chooses not to apply for a waiver or is turned down, will local districts be able to apply individually? Unlike RTTT, the ability to apply also counts since this waiver process is not a grant program that will provide a state or local district with additional funding to pay for new ED reform requirements it might have to meet.

■ By tying significant reform conditions to granting waivers, is ED getting ahead of Congress' own agenda in a way that may result in significant local disruption if different priorities, policies, and operational requirements are chosen in the ESEA reauthorization?

From NSBA's perspective, the better public policy approach is for Secretary Duncan to simply issue rules that release districts from implementing ineffective and wasteful requirements—like the 20 percent SES set-aside—until the new ESEA becomes operational. Replacing one set of federal policy directives with another without Congressional input, especially with reauthorization on the horizon, does not seem to be the clearest path for the federal role at this time.

School board members are encouraged to join the NSBA/AASA petition and resolution drive to ensure that members of Congress and the ED get the message that NCLB's onerous burdens must be removed immediately and in a manner that will work at the local level.

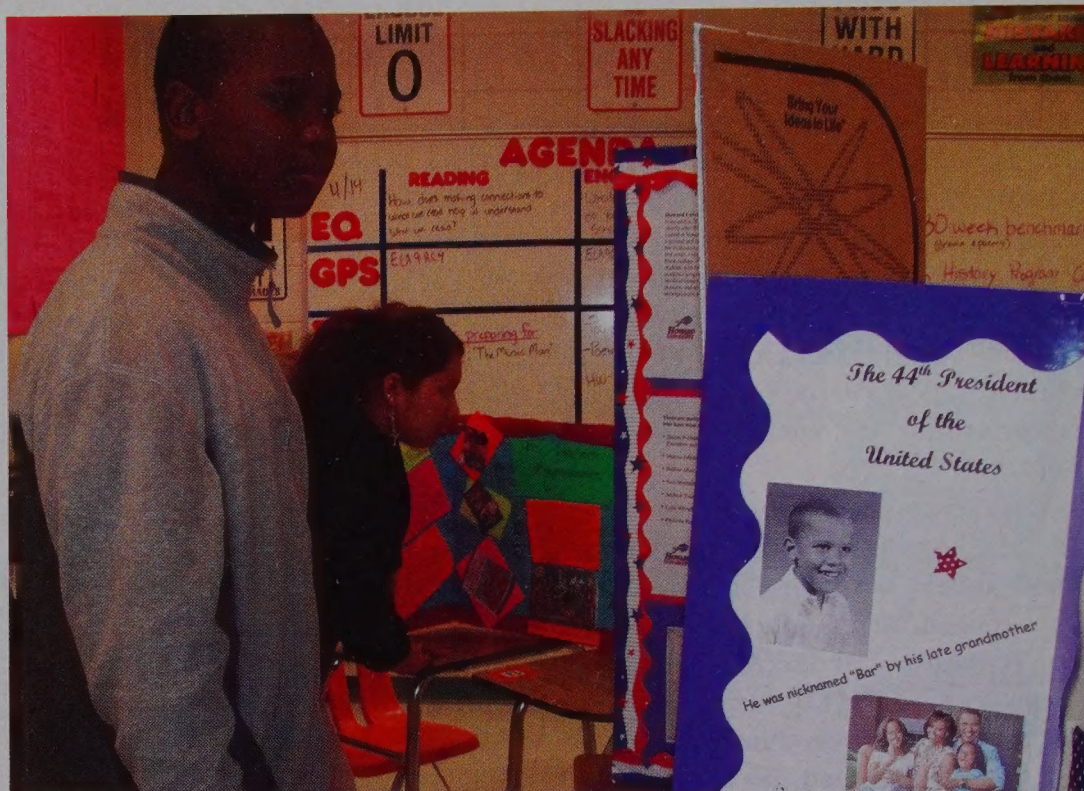
To find out how you can join this effort, please see [www.nsba.org/advocacy](http://www.nsba.org/advocacy). ■

Michael A. Resnick ([mresnick@nsba.org](mailto:mresnick@nsba.org)) is NSBA's associate executive director for federal advocacy and public policy. His column appears monthly in *ASBJ*.



## From the states

### Magna Best Practices: A class of their own



Six years ago, the high school graduation rate at Mitchell County School System in Camilla, Ga., was 54 percent. At the same time, only 61.5 percent of county residents had earned a high school diploma and postsecondary enrollment was only 26 percent.

Mitchell County's solution to increase high school graduation rates and promote college awareness, the Freshman Academy, earned the district a 2011 Magna Award in the under 5,000 enrollment category.

The Freshman Academy was designed to better prepare students academically, socially, and mentally for the transition from middle school to high school. It is located in a separate wing of the high school and has a freshman facilities and administrative support team. Students are provided with instructional support by the academy staff during school breaks, Saturday morning tutoring sessions, and after-school programs. Class sizes are kept

low with a teacher-to-student ratio of 1:18.

Five years into the program, 85 percent of freshmen were promoted and the dropout rate among freshman decreased significantly, to 1 percent. The high school graduation rate increased to nearly 88 percent.

For more information, contact curriculum director Christy C. Wray at [christy\\_wray@mitchell.k12.ga.us](mailto:christy_wray@mitchell.k12.ga.us). The district's website is at [www.mitchell.k12.ga.us](http://www.mitchell.k12.ga.us).

Would you like to see your district's exemplary program featured here? Nominations for the 2012 Magna Awards will be open Aug. 1 and run through Oct. 31.

Go to [www.asbj.com/magna](http://www.asbj.com/magna) to apply online and read about past award-winning programs. The three grand prize winning districts receive cash awards. All winning districts are featured in an issue of *ASBJ* and are honored at a luncheon at NSBA's annual conference in April.

■ The Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA) praised a state Supreme Court ruling striking down a state commission that could approve and direct funding to charter schools over the objection of local school boards. GSBA noted, "In preserving the 134-year history of local control enshrined in the current and earlier Georgia Constitutions, the Court rejected the General Assembly's attempt to expand its authority to create 'special' state schools and to define 'special' to mean whatever it wanted it to mean."

■ New Jersey's Pascack Valley Regional High School District let visitors peek into the inner workings of its successful eLearning initiative through a webinar hosted by the New Jersey School Boards Association and NSBA. View the webinar at: [www.njsba.org/learnatlunch/archives.html](http://www.njsba.org/learnatlunch/archives.html).

■ The Missouri School Boards Association's foundation, FutureBuilders, helped solicit donations for the Joplin, Mo., school district, which saw most of its schools leveled or seriously damaged by a deadly May tornado. Joplin won the 2011 Magna Grand Prize for districts in the 5,000 to 20,000 student enrollment category. It had launched a comprehensive program to engage community members and map out a strategic plan, which resulted in a much lower dropout rate and significant donations of time and money from community members and local businesses.

■ The New York State School Boards Association has unveiled a legislative reform package to tackle runaway costs in seven key areas. The "2011 Essential Fiscal Reform Playbook" proposes legislation to curtail rising health care and pension costs, level the playing field during contract negotiations, impose tighter controls on the teacher disciplinary process, and bring special education costs into line with other states.



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# Q&A with early education expert Arthur Reynolds

**E**nrolling disadvantaged children in a high-quality preschool program can have surprisingly enduring benefits—with an impact that can still be found in early adulthood, according to a new study from the University of Minnesota.

What's more, it is the children at greatest risk of failing in school and later in adulthood—such as African-American males and those living in high-poverty neighborhoods—who benefit most from the preschool experience.

These findings won't surprise many school board members, but the study led by child development professor Arthur Reynolds is noteworthy for the persuasive evidence it brings to bear. The Chicago Longitudinal Study is one of the largest and longest research projects of its kind, having tracked the academic, economic, and social experiences of more than 1,500 children for 25 years—from their first preschool and kindergarten experiences in the 1980s through early adulthood.

The study examined two groups: almost 1,000 children enrolled in the Chicago Public Schools' federally funded Child Parent Centers, a well-respected preschool program, and a control group of more than 500 children who didn't attend preschool but who participated in full-day kindergarten. Many of the children were from low-income, largely African-American households in poorer Chicago neighborhoods.

Reynolds, who also serves as co-director of the Human Capital Research Collaborative, spoke to *ASBJ*

senior editor Del Stover about his research and how its findings can guide school boards in developing early education policies.

## **How did you go about determining the impact of a child's preschool experience?**

We started with a cohort of kids [and] followed their progress over the next 25 years—and compared them to an equivalent group of kids randomly selected in other early intervention programs, usually kindergarten programs.

We tracked both groups with the support of the Chicago Public Schools.... We looked at school records, surveyed parents and teachers, and used any approach for data collection to get a comprehensive look at [the students'] progress in school and eventually in adulthood.

## **What were the preschool experiences of the children in your study?**

### **How did the control group's experience differ?**

The Child Parent Centers were much more innovative in that kids started preschool earlier, so all these kids started at ages 3 or 4. The usual intervention [in Chicago] was to start in kindergarten. So that's one big difference.

The centers also had a much heavier emphasis on language development and structured educational activities in the classroom, with a very intensive parent-involvement program.

## **What were your most significant findings?**

The most significant is that a large-



scale, school-based program—run through the third-largest school system in the country—can have effects 25 years later. That's almost unheard of for most federally funded programs.

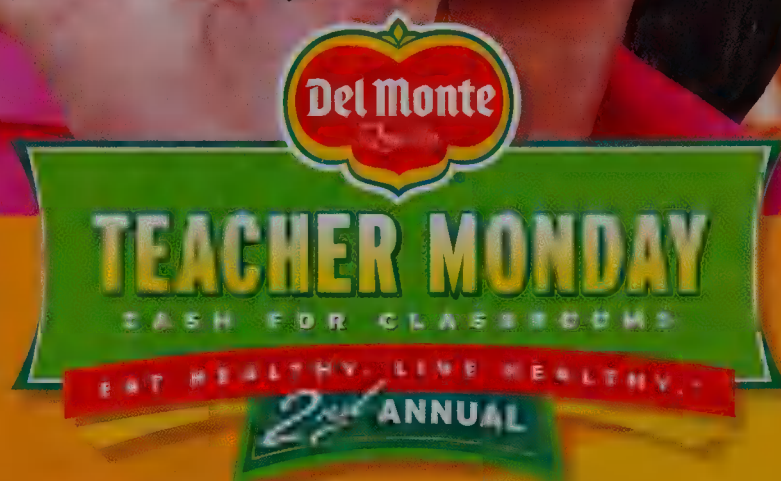
The breadth of these effects also are noteworthy, not only in educational outcomes but also in carrying over to improvements in socioeconomic status, job skills, average annual income, and health and socioeconomic outcomes, such as reductions in involvement in the juvenile justice system, lower rates of arrest and incarceration as adults, and in rates of substance abuse.

## **Many boards already support preschool programs. What are some specific strategies that could make their programs more effective?**

There should be an opportunity for more than one year of preschool participation—and hopefully the availability of full-day services. Our evidence

*Continued on page 12*





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## Q&A: ARTHUR REYNOLDS

Continued from page 10

shows that ... kids with two years of preschool are associated with higher academic gains and long-term success.

We can't assume that providing preschool education is all that children need. We need to enrich those experiences with a longer duration of implementation organized within the school environment. We can do the pre-K-to-grade-three experiences in a serious way—designed with follow-through activities that school districts are funding with Title I money. Funding must be aligned so that kids are provided with a natural course of services later in kindergarten and beyond.

Small classes made the programs more effective ... classes that didn't exceed 17 children. We also saw results with a strong activity-based curriculum focused on language, literacy, communications skills, and that those schools using evidence-based curricula in a structured way will strengthen learning gains.

### What other advice can you offer board members?

Any district could take the Child Parent Centers [program] and adopt a model that follows the same strategy ... to follow these principals of effectiveness. It's doable. It's documented. This could be a strategy that provides a greater level of quality and effectiveness beyond that which most districts and states are realizing.

Programs like the Child Parent Centers have a much bigger bang for the buck than most other programs. The cost savings that districts will get back oftentimes and usually far exceeds the return on investments in other remediation and intervention services that come later when students are struggling. ■

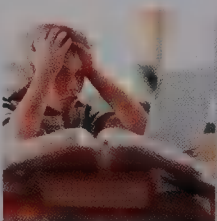
# Talk About It

Our monthly list of topics worth discussing



### ECS: Shorter weeks do not mean big cost savings

Facing severe budget woes, many states and school districts have moved to or considered a four-day week to save costs for transportation, utilities, and other incidentals. So how much did those who lobbed off a day in the week really save? According to a recent report by the Education Commission of the States (ECS), cost savings for a four-day week actually only amount to between 0.4 percent and 2.5 percent of the total budget, with a maximum of 5.4 percent savings. The analysis used national finance data supported by information from individual districts.



### How much homework is enough?

School boards across the nation are rethinking homework policies because of concerns that high-stakes testing and competition for college have resulted in a nightly grind that is stressing out children and depriving them of play and rest, according to the *New York Times*. Many say that hours of homework do little to raise student achievement, particularly in elementary grades. The *Times* reported that teachers at an elementary school in Fontana, Calif., replaced homework "with 'goal work' that is specific to individual student's needs and that can be completed in class or at home at his or her own pace." Another California district, Pleasanton School District, has proposed to cut homework times and pro-

hibit weekend assignments in elementary grades.



### Nashville superintendent calls for 'balanced schedule'

Jesse Register, superintendent of the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, wants his students to give up part of their summer vacations and return to school in late July. Register and others cite research that shows the longer a student stays out of class, the less knowledge they retain. That's particularly critical for the district's low-income students and English language learners, he told the school board this summer, according to the *Tennessean*. The plan he presented to the Nashville school board this summer would add three extra days of instructional time for all students, 10 teacher professional development days, and two weeks of intensive instruction for low-performing students. The plan would add \$20 million in costs.



### LAUSD gives away excess food, bans chocolate milk

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) will give up to 21,000 uneaten school meals a day to nonprofit organizations that feed the hungry. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, nonprofit organizations that want the school food must apply to become partners with a local school. The types of foods available might include packaged foods such as granola bars or cereal, entrees, fruit,



vegetables, and milk, the district's deputy food services director told the *Times*. One item that won't be found in LAUSD cafeterias this fall: flavored milk. After months of debate, the school board voted to eliminate chocolate and strawberry milk from schools beginning July 1, joining a number of districts that have done so.

### EPA chief says more air monitoring needed in some schools

The head of the federal Environmental Protection Agency

(EPA) says more monitoring of air quality near schools is needed after preliminary results of an investigation found some concentrations of toxic chemicals that are higher than what the agency considers safe for long-term exposure. The study analyzed air samples outside 63 schools in 22 states over the past three years, *USA Today* reported. The EPA conducted the tests in response to the newspaper's 2008 investigation that identified hundreds of schools where outside air appeared to have excessive amounts of industrial pollution. However, the EPA found that most of the air monitoring so far has not found dangerous levels of pollution.

### Homeless mom case includes drug and prostitution claims

The ongoing case of an allegedly homeless Connecticut mother

who forged an address to enroll her children in a Norwalk elementary school gained national attention and debate. The mother, Tanya McDowell, was ordered to go to trial for "stealing an education" by using her babysitter's address to enroll her son in kindergarten. The case took an unexpected turn in June when McDowell was arrested for allegedly selling crack cocaine

and marijuana to undercover officers, according to CBS News. McDowell was sent to jail on those charges while police investigated a separate prostitution charge. The education case entails a larceny charge for the \$15,686 cost of edu-

cating her child for a year, according to the *Daily Norwalk*. The school district said it did not initiate the court proceedings to remove the child from the elementary school nor seek reimbursement for the costs of the education. ■

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# ■ YOUR TURN

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## YOU SAY

### You're on the road to reform

W

hether your district is experiencing continuous improvement or moving ahead by fits and starts, school systems everywhere are always trying to get better. Just where are your schools on the path of—to use a somewhat fuzzy term—school reform?

Twenty-one percent of you said you're "in the midst of a comprehensive school reform effort." Twenty-nine percent said you're making progress but have a long way to go. Another 21 percent said "we're just trying to maintain what we have now." And 29 percent marked "none of the above."

Some comments:

■ Academic achievement is always our main focus but we are amidst a major upgrade in technology—both in

integrating it in our teaching and improving our infrastructure. It is a tough issue since we have to assure parents that the teacher in the classroom is the most important element of teaching but we cannot do what we need to if we are so far behind with technology.

—Mollie Kabler, board member, Alaska

■ We're doing entirely too much testing, thus wasting time that could have been used to actually educate our students.

—board member, Ohio

■ We are in the process of high school reform using business and college partnerships to enhance the experience. All classrooms have a smart board, document camera, and projec-

tor with a teacher trained to use them. We are implementing a 1 to 1 iPad initiative in grades seven to 12 and will have a digital device available to all students soon. We are beginning Spanish language learning at the kindergarten level for all students.

—Mike Mathes, superintendent, Kansas

■ We have enjoyed the highest passing percentage in our region on state standardized testing for four consecutive years. After being one of two school districts in the state set for state takeover due to low performance back in 2002, we feel we have come a long way.

—Paul Vranish, superintendent, Texas

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#### Please address letters to:

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## WE ASK

### What are you doing about concussions?

Not long ago, we might have called it a "bump on the head," and told the high school athlete who suffered one to "walk it off" or "tough it out." We're not nearly as ignorant about concussions today, but as Senior Editor Naomi Dillon points out on Page 16, many of us still have big misconceptions about a potentially serious injury. For example, as Dillon points out, the idea that one has to lose consciousness—or even has to suffer a distinguishable "bump"—to risk permanent brain damage is untrue.

A bill has been introduced in Congress that would require school districts to create concussion management plans and post information about concussions on school grounds and websites. However, as of press time, it had not moved beyond the subcommittee stage.

But that doesn't mean that school systems can't address the issue on their own. So this month, we put that question to you: What has your district done to confront a problem that sends some 1.7 million people to emergency rooms each year, nearly half of them children 14 and younger?

Please choose one of the answers below and send your choice, along with your comments, to [your-turn@asbj.org](mailto:your-turn@asbj.org). We'll report the results in October.

A. Our district has a comprehensive policy to deal with concussions.

B. We're working on a plan.

C. We haven't addressed the issue.

D. None of the above.

**About the Your Turn survey:** These responses represent the views of the ASBJ Reader Panel, a self-selected sample of subscribers, plus other readers who choose to participate by postal mail, e-mail, or online at [www.asbj.com](http://www.asbj.com). The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of *American School Board Journal* or of its publisher, the National School Boards Association. **Join the panel at [www.asbj.com/readerpanel](http://www.asbj.com/readerpanel).**



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Naomi Dillon

# Head Games

**As more research about the dangers of concussions in children and youth surfaces, districts are taking the lead to protect all their students from traumatic brain injuries**

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veryone knows football is a rough-and-tumble sport. Indeed, its take-no-prisoners style is part of its appeal and one of the reasons the game has become a national pastime.

Still, it shocked fans when Hall of Fame quarterback Terry Bradshaw revealed earlier this year that the multiple concussions he sustained during his NFL career left him with irreparable brain damage. Just months earlier, Kansas high school football star and homecoming king Nathan Stiles collapsed on the sidelines and died from second-impact syndrome, a fatal condition that—as its name suggests—occurs when a second concussion is sustained before the first one has completely healed.

Clearly, no athlete should take these types of risks. Fortunately, that message is finally spreading, spurring new policies and practices along the way.

“There’s always the tipping point on any issue, and we’ve reached it here on concussions,” says Gerry Gioia, who’s had no small hand in shifting the balance and bringing attention to the seriousness of this often-underestimated injury.

As chief of neuropsychology at Children’s National Medical Center in Washington, D.C., Gioia has treated more than his share of kids who’ve experienced the hard knocks of life.

“If you’ve never had a concussion, it’s a miserable thing,” says Gioia, who also directs the hospital’s Safe Concussion Outcome, Recovery & Education Program. “It’s like having the

flu, 10 times over. This injury is no joke.”

Concussions account for one in every 10 sports injuries, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Mild traumatic brain injuries, a term used interchangeably with concussions, sends some 1.7 million individuals to the emergency room (ER) each year. Nearly half a million of those ER visits are for children 14 and younger.

The vast majority of concussions are mild, with only 275,000 cases requiring hospitalization annually, but the injury itself is complex, especially when it affects a child’s developing brain. Far too often, what began as mild head trauma develops into major life drama when students, families, and schools don’t fully comprehend the injury and manage it properly.

“To me, schools are such an important part of this whole injury issue but a lot of people weren’t connecting the dots,” Gioia says.

## **Out of control, yet underplayed**

It’s easy to understand why mild brain injuries are so misunderstood.

For starters, a concussion does not mean an individual has bruised the brain. In fact, the head doesn’t have to be struck at all to incur a concussion. Brain scans frequently show no signs of swelling or bleeding.

In purely unscientific terms, imagine your skull is an egg and your brain is the yolk. Fluid surrounds your brain, cushioning it from the jostles of everyday life. A concussion occurs when the brain is shaken rapidly, altering the delicate balance of chemicals in the brain and constricting the arteries that pro-



vide it with blood flow.

And from there, it only gets trickier.

"There's a variety of things that can go on, so if you're twisting, being shook, if you took a direct hit to the back or side of the head, depending on the amount of force and where that force is transferred makes all the difference to the injury itself and how it might manifest," says Marlena Wald, an epidemiologist at the CDC's Division of Injury Response.

The symptoms—ranging from nausea and headaches to memory loss and balance problems—don't always appear right away. And the patients themselves can make matters worse.

"It's difficult enough with an adult to have a clinical discussion, but with children it's difficult to determine their level of pain and discomfort," Wald says.

But that's assuming the child has sought or been directed to a medical professional in the first place.

"The global problem is people don't understand it," says Brian Robinson, the head athletic trainer at Glenbrook South High School in north suburban Chicago.

Despite a recent study noting that loss of consciousness occurs in less than 5 percent of concussions, Robinson says most people still think the two go hand in hand. Other misconceptions include the belief that there is a standard recovery time—it's a highly individualized injury—and athletes are the only ones in real jeopardy.

It's true that sports, particularly high-impact activities, put children most at risk, but Robinson says a concussion can happen to anyone.

"One of the worst concussions here happened to a girl in P.E. class who stood up and hit her head on the locker," says Robinson, who also chairs the National Athletic Trainer Association's Secondary School Committee.

Perhaps the biggest and deadliest misconception is that treatment simply requires limiting physical activity and exertion.

"We spend 90 percent of our time in the clinic around how to return that kid to school," Gioia says. "The sports side is the easy part. I can easily restrict sports. It's not so easy to restrict the academic side."

### **Concussions not child's play**

In the spring of 2010, Gioia got a call from U.S. Rep. George Miller's (D-Calif.) office. A flurry of media attention and disquieting study results had pushed the issue of concussions into the spotlight. Miller, then co-chair of the House committee that oversees education, was concerned.

In the months prior, the Center for Injury Research and Policy at Ohio's Nationwide Children's Hospital released disturbing research: Some 40 percent of high school athletes who sustain a concussion return to play prematurely. The data showed that students with one concussion were four times more likely to get another concussion, and those second concussions were far more dangerous.

Alarmed, Miller and two other lawmakers asked the Government Accountability Office to conduct its own review. The report—along with testimony from Gioia, concussion victims, and other medical experts—served as the basis for Miller's bill, the Protecting Student Athletes from Concussions Act.

The bill asks districts to create concussion safety and management plans and requires them to post information about concussions on school grounds and websites. It was introduced in January.

The bill calls attention to the need for more information on how concussions affect students educationally, which is the "untold story," Gioia says. Simple rest often is the only way to heal from a concussion, but many don't realize this means giving your mind a break, too.

"In recovery, what we're trying to do is allow the brain's natural system to return to that status quo, that normal state," Gioia says. "The problem is, the more we interfere with that by overworking our brains, the longer it takes. It's like jumping up and down on a bad knee. It's going to hurt like hell and delay that recovery from happening."

Incredibly, kids often return to school the day after sustaining a concussion. It won't be until halfway through classes, or maybe the following day, that they realize something isn't right. That's when they show up in Gioia's office.

"What we found in the past was: the kid goes back, nobody knows or recognizes the symptoms," Gioia says. "Then we moved toward: the family knows, but the schools don't. Now we've got both groups working together, recognizing the elements that play into this injury, and how they can work together."

It wouldn't be the first time Congress had taken note of the gravity of concussions.

In 1996, the Traumatic Brain Injury Act directed a number of federal agencies, including the CDC, to research and monitor the injury within the general population. That mandate was renewed and expanded in the Children's Healthcare Act of 2000, which called for the CDC to develop and disseminate concussion prevention and management material.

The CDC's Heads Up campaign, launched in 2005, initially sent toolkits featuring prevention measures, detection signs, and a multistep assessment plan for pediatricians and physicians. Follow-up surveys fanned the information out to athletic personnel, community coaches, and finally, last year, to teachers and families.

"A teacher who sees students every day is in a unique position to observe their growth throughout the year," Wald says. "If you're a classroom teacher, you're going to say 'Heather doesn't normally behave this way' and that is important because the school nurse and parents can be alerted."

The Heads Up campaign has been an evolutionary process, with the CDC collaborating with more than 75 different partners—including NSBA—to tailor each wave of toolkits to var-



ious audiences. The key messages, however, have always been the same.

"The scientific content is different, yes, but what we say to a physician versus a teacher is consistent in terms of recognizing concussions and taking next steps," Wald says. "Traumatic brain injuries are a public health problem in the U.S."

### States, districts lead the way

With so much focus on averting another financial crisis, it's more than possible that the concussion bill, which at press time had not moved past the subcommittee stage, may remain on Congress' back burner.

Fortunately, federal inertia won't dim the spotlight on concussions, which has gained momentum thanks to activity at the state and local levels.

It started in Washington state, when 13-year-old Zack Lystedt was left permanently disabled during a junior high school football game in 2006. Video footage shows Zack clutching his head after a brutal first-half tackle, but he returned to play in the second half—to disastrous results.

Airlifted from the field, Zack spent three months in a coma and 20 months on a feeding tube. In 2009—the same year in which he could stand with some assistance—the state passed the Lystedt Law, which requires young athletes suspected of having a concussion to obtain clearance from a licensed health care provider before returning to action.

More than a dozen states have since enacted similar laws, and legislation is pending in twice that number. But the rapid legislative movement hasn't been without setbacks.

Lee Green, a business professor at Kansas' Baker University and an attorney specializing in sports law, says a major weakness in the various laws is they are too vague about who is authorized to allow students to return to the playing field.

"It doesn't define with much specificity what constitutes a medical professional," Green says, "so you could have an athletic trainer or a general practitioner returning [students] to practice and not a specialist in traumatic brain injuries."

Gioia says the vagueness is intentional, noting that treatment is a process that should be overseen by professionals with training in brain functioning and neurology. "The brain is the most complex organ in the body and there is no one discipline that is uniquely qualified to treat a concussion," he says.

Being too specific in law presents a risk because it could antagonize anyone who is or isn't identified as a qualified concussion management specialist. In 2010, the Florida Family of Physicians managed to get a concussion bill quashed after balking at the idea that chiropractors could provide clearance on the injury.

"Whether you agree or disagree with (including) chiropractors, it ended up stalling what we all would agree is an important issue," says Gioia, who most recently worked with Maryland and Virginia in the successful passage of concussion bills.

### Working at the local level

For Fairfax County Public Schools in northern Virginia, the state mandate—which went into effect last month—is merely a formality.

"We've been involved in research that has created a change in the actual definition of a concussion," says athletic trainer and administrator Jon Almquist.

Almquist's team has worked with a number of research institutions and organizations studying the injury, including half of the presenters at the International Conference on Concussion in Sport held in Zurich in 2008.

A pioneer of many of the best practices submitted at the conference, Fairfax County has been ahead of the curve in changing local attitudes and district policies, which now include baseline testing of all incoming athletes and required education for students, families, and athletic personnel on detecting, preventing, and managing concussions.

"Five years ago when we put some of these interventions in place, we had a lot more negative feedback from the community," Almquist says. "I had parents calling me ringing me up, telling me, 'My daughter doesn't have a concussion.'"

Cooperation and understanding about the serious nature of concussions has improved since then, but it's far from a done deal.

"People lie. Kids minimize symptoms," Almquist says. "That's why this is so difficult and a challenge to us."

Tim Flannery is sympathetic.

"In sports, there's a culture that we don't want to tell when we're hurt because they'll take us out," says Flannery, assistant director of the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS), which establishes standards and rules for the roughly 11 million students who participate in extracurricular activities and sports every year.

"The whole point of education is getting them to understand you have to tell someone when you're hurt because it's dangerous when you don't," Flannery says.

Using CDC materials, NFHS produced a short online course on concussions last year that is free to view on the association's website. So far, 162,000 coaches and students have taken the course, with the highest numbers coming from states that mandate training. In Virginia alone, for example, more than 15,000 coaches and athletes have watched the course.

"We would have situations where the athletic trainer would say 'This kid needs to sit out' and the coaches would say 'No way.' That's not happening anymore," Flannery says. "That's why we're seeing a lot more concussions reported, because more people are aware of it. And I tell you, when the other states pass laws that require training, these numbers will skyrocket, and that's positive." ■

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Naomi Dillon (ndillon@nsba.org) is a senior editor of *American School Board Journal*.




William Habermehl

# Player Protection

**Spurred by the sudden deaths of four student athletes, a California county pulls together school officials, local leaders, and medical and health care professionals to prevent more tragedies**







A 16-year-old male athlete succumbed to heat exhaustion during the first day of football practice, making him the fourth student to die suddenly in California's Orange County within six months.

The coaching staff did everything possible on that August 2007 day, and the Orange County Fire Authority paramedics were on the scene within minutes. Despite their efforts, the student died on the way to the hospital.

What was going on? We had gone through a long period with no deaths, and then within a short period four students died while participating in athletic programs. Orange County has 27 school districts serving 500,000 students. We have more than 70 high schools, including private and parochial. Thousands of our students participate in sports each year while at school, in club sports, and in after-school programs.

The deaths of these four student athletes served as the catalyst for us to join an already existing program that has the potential to save young lives—Life-threatening Events Associated with Pediatric Sports (LEAPS). The initiative has brought together people from the fields of medicine, education, and fire and paramedic services to further examine and prevent more deaths of student athletes in Orange County.

#### **Water, 911, and AEDs**

In the spring of 2008, Orange County Fire Chief Chip Prather and I met to discuss the student deaths. He emphasized three issues. The first issue was hydration. He wanted to collaborate with the Orange County Department of Education to get the word out about the critical importance of adequate hydration. The goal was to ensure that all sports participants were aware of the importance of hydration before, during, and after any type of strenuous physical activity.

Prather's second issue was response time and

the use of the 911 emergency system. He suspected that coaches, school officials, trainers, and others were reluctant to call 911 unless a situation was very serious. He wanted to stress that it is better to have the fire department roll out their trucks and paramedics immediately rather than waste critical minutes trying to determine whether a student is in crisis or not.

His third topic was the presence and use of Automated External Defibrillators (AEDs) in schools. Prather pointed out that many public and private facilities were installing AEDs, which introduces a mild electronic shock to bring the heart back into lifesaving rhythm. Only 10 of the 27 school districts in Orange County currently had the devices available for use at school sites and athletic events.

To get this information out, we set up meetings with many community partners from the medical and health care fields, as well as with representatives from Orange County districts. With this very diverse group, we had to be careful that we did not move in 100 different directions but rather focus on those areas that would make a difference quickly.

The 2009-10 school year was very productive for the LEAPS committee. We formed four work groups to engage medical, public health, school, and athletic program leaders to develop recommendations for preventing, responding to, and learning from student medical emergencies.

The first work group, headed by Dr. Ajan Batra and Dr. Anthony of the Children's Hospital of Orange County, focused on student health screenings. It recommended adopting the American Academy of Pediatrics preseason physical exam, requiring electrocardiograms (EKGs) as part of the preseason physical for all student athletes entering ninth grade, and using electronic medical records for student athletes.

The second group, led by Dr. Sam Stratton of the Orange County Health Care Agency, concentrated on emergency preparedness. It recommended including basic CPR-life support training and certification for all school staff and middle and



high school students, and writing guidelines for adoption and implementation of AEDs in all schools.

A third group, chaired by Dr. Eric Handler of the Orange County Health Care Agency, was charged with making recommendations for learning from the life-threatening events at our schools. It created guidelines for responding to critical incidents, training, and confidential sharing of information. It planned how to support school communities during and after a medical emergency, including how and when to use 911.

The fourth work group, led by Dr. John Schlechter of Children's Hospital of Orange County, worked to identify and engage high school team trainers and physicians. It sought to provide local and regional support for high school athletic directors, trainers, and physicians. It also made recommendations for professional development and community education programs for athletic directors, high school and youth sports coaches, student athletes, and parents.

## Results

One of the first outcomes of the LEAPS collaboration was the Hydrated and Healthy campaign, debuting at the high school where the football player had died of heat exhaustion. We developed a website—<http://hydration.ocde.us>—that outlined the best practices in hydration. Videos posted on the site can be downloaded for distribution to remind student athletes and children at play to stay hydrated.

In addition to informing the community about the importance of hydration, the LEAPS group wanted to make sure that schools were prepared to act rapidly and appropriately during emergency situations. The Orange County Fire Authority again urged schools to call 911 immediately in case of a possible emergency.

Educating all staff and students in CPR was another recommendation of the collaborative. We know that lives can be saved when CPR is performed quickly and correctly. More widespread use of AEDs was another recommendation that the LEAPS group decided to push for.

The group also pushed for student prescreening before participating in athletics. Determining which student athletes might be at risk for cardiac events is an important piece of the puzzle. The use of EKGs as part of the athletic physical can help determine if students have a congenital heart condition that might put them at high risk for a sudden cardiac event.

We have a pilot program to offer EKGs to student athletes at one high school. Further recommendations for including an EKG in the preparticipation screening process will be made after reviewing the outcome data from this pilot. However, judging from the initial findings, an EKG is going to become an integral part of these examinations. Of 135 students screened, 5.9 percent (seven boys and one girl) need to get either a follow-up EKG or echocardiogram.

Those are significant numbers—they represent real people.

## Synergy

The work group participants have held three conferences to share what they have learned and the recommendations that grew from the information. Everyone came to the table with ideas and was willing to work to turn the agreed-upon ideas into a quality conference program.

More than 150 coaches, physicians, school nurses, school administrators, and community members attended the conference in February 2010. A panel of experts in each of the four areas shared the latest evidence-based knowledge on the mechanisms of sudden death in young athletes and the most current standards for emergency treatment. Also discussed was the idea of standardization of preparticipation physicals throughout the county school districts.

The third conference was held in January in conjunction with Children's Hospital of Orange County's Sudden Cardiac Arrest in Children and Adolescents Conference.

The four LEAPS work groups have undertaken some significant challenges and have produced recommendations that are far-reaching with immediate impact. It has been exciting to see how well doctors, educators, school board members, representatives from other organizations, and vendors have joined together to face serious issues and make a difference. The synergy created in this project has been profound and gratifying.

In just a short time, many schools have purchased AEDs, and a foundation has been created to assist them in getting the best price possible. Work groups meet on an ongoing basis to discuss concerns related to emergency preparedness in our schools, to plan ongoing education for schools and the community about sports safety, and to develop follow-up procedures for school medical emergencies.

To date, we have these major projects under way: an annual concussion conference dealing with head traumas in student athletes, EKG screening for high school athletics, CPR training for all eighth-grade students, standardization of health forms from all school districts, Web development to include updates, policies, and procedures to assist in the implementation of AEDs at all schools, sharing of the hydration website with all coaches and parents groups, and an annual reminder to call 911 and not wait.

It has been a journey filled with enthusiasm, commitment, and hard work. We are confident that the work we have done has the potential to save lives. The dedicated efforts of LEAPS have changed the way our communities support our young athletes and the way we respond to emergency incidents. We have made a difference, and that makes it all worthwhile. ■

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William Habermehl ([bhabermehl@ocde.us](mailto:bhabermehl@ocde.us)) is superintendent of schools in Orange County, Calif.



# The Team Behind The Team

Lawrence Hardy

**Parent-run booster clubs can offer enormous financial support to school athletics programs, but boards must balance the benefits of boosters with other legal, financial, and oversight considerations**

**A** parent group wants your school district to elevate a boys' high school baseball club they've funded for two years to the status of a state-sanctioned, varsity sport. Noting that other district high schools have baseball teams, they're offering to pay \$7,000 of the coach's salary with money they've raised through concession sales, car washes, and

other activities.

You're on the school board. What do you do?

This was no hypothetical situation for the board of the 73,000-student Brevard Public Schools, Florida's 10th largest district. Last September, after much deliberation and a fair amount of anguish, board members unanimously turned down the parents' request. In doing so, the board did not endear itself to the 50 or so loyal baseball supporters in the audience—the kind of people districts count on for support during these tough economic times.



"They don't understand it," says Vice Chairwoman Amy Kneessy, referring to some of the more passionate parent boosters. "They feel, in their minds, that they're doing the work—why are we putting up blocks?"

Brevard's story is more complicated than it first appears. For one thing, Edgewood Junior Senior High on Merritt Island is a school of choice and was not designed to have a full range of varsity sports. Second, the district has been sued over Title IX, the federal law that requires comparable support for boys and girls activities.

Its case involved girls' softball and, incidentally, boys' baseball. And Brevard lost in district court, so board members were sensitive to maintaining gender balance in sports as well as to a sense of equity in a county whose students range from the extremely rich to the very poor.

"The equality of opportunity should not be determined by your zip code," Kneessy says.

#### **Keep tabs on the money**

Brevard's cautionary tale shows that dealing effectively with booster clubs requires more than simply accepting their hard-earned donations and doing what they ask. If districts don't approach the question of booster club support with well-considered policies, school attorneys and other experts say, they could open themselves to a host of potential problems, including negligence suits, Title IX violations, and even embezzlement and fraud.

Of course, the vast majority of booster clubs—those in Brevard County included—do wonderful work, and their financial support is all but essential in this struggling economy. The stress on school budgets is palpable. Extracurricular activities, from band to swimming, volleyball to softball, to all types of junior varsity sports, are increasingly vulnerable. Districts have responded by initiating pay-to-play policies and leaning on booster clubs for financial support.

An August 2010 survey by the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA) found that 33.5 percent of its members who responded had increased or were increasing pay-to-play fees for sports and activities, and 6.5 percent were introducing fees for the first time.

"Particularly here in Michigan, where districts are hunting for every dollar they can get, it's hard to turn away money" from outside sources, says Brad Banasik, counsel for the Michigan Association of School Boards.

**'The  
equality of  
opportunity  
should  
not be  
determined  
by your  
zip code.'**

Legal concerns arise when dealing with booster clubs. One is the risk of injury that may occur at events that booster clubs join or sponsor. Who is liable depends on a number of factors, including whether the group is permitted special access to school property, whether employees routinely assist in their functions, and whether the booster clubs are legally established as separate not-for-profit entities. Banasik suggests that booster clubs become separate 501c3s—a nonprofit category.

Many small and informal booster clubs don't take that step. But, at a minimum, districts should have close communication with booster clubs and require them to follow district policies.

Another problem is fraud. "Unfortunately," Banasik says in an article for *NSBA's Inquiry & Analysis*, "booster clubs and parent groups have become targets at an increasingly high rate."

The article points to one of Michigan's more sensational cases, in which a former principal pleaded guilty to embezzling and laundering \$400,000 from an elementary school's parent-teacher organization and child care program.

That was five years ago. If anything, with the economic downturn and the increased reliance on outside sources of funding, the potential for fraud and abuse has become even greater, says Charles K. Trainor, *ASBJ's* Money columnist and a certified fraud examiner and certified internal auditor in New York state.

To protect themselves, some school boards have initiated approval processes for outside organizations using the district's name or mascot, and others have distributed handbooks with suggested policies, Trainor says. He urges schools to require dedicated accounts for booster club funds and an annual audit or monthly financial reports to club members. Checks should require two signatures and should have three-part receipts, with copies going to the donor, the treasurer, and the person receiving the money.

Fraud is the biggest and potentially the most damaging problem districts could face, Trainor says, but others exist, including the booster club becoming something of a "shadow government" for the district.

"I've seen situations where they've built dugouts and the board didn't know about it," Trainor says. "What if someone were injured building this thing?"



The answer to such missteps, as you might expect, is closer communication between the district and booster clubs. “There has to be a formal or informal—I think formal is probably better—line of communication,” Trainor says.

### **Title IX concerns**

The issue of gender equity in high school sports is rarely litigated, but that may be changing. In November, the National Women’s Law Center filed complaints alleging that 12 school districts across the country—including those in New York City, Chicago, and Houston—do not give equal sports opportunities to girls. An organization called The College Sports Council, which advocates for Title IX changes, is urging the districts to fight the lawsuits in court.

Brevard County found itself on the losing side of a gender equity complaint in the mid-1990s, and it was this experience that helped inform its decision on the Edgewood High baseball team, Kneessy says.

Parents of girls’ softball players sued the district over the lack of a field at two high schools. The boys had their own baseball fields; girls had to travel to a county park to play softball. The district maintained it was doing its best to balance the boys’ and girls’ programs, but Kneessy says that, in retrospect, she can see the girls’ point.

“The girls, in fact, had to deal with trash,” she says. “They had to deal with empty beer bottles, and with getting run off” by other groups who thought they had priority.

Losing the lawsuit was expensive; the district had to build two softball fields at a time when money was getting tight.

That decision was on board members’ minds when they debated the proposal to make Edgewood High’s boys’ baseball club a varsity sport, Kneessy says. They also were concerned about economic equity.

“Boosters don’t want to deal with Title IX,” she says, “But we school board members are aware that Title IX is still active out there, and we have to have equal activities for boys and girls.”

Baseball advocates had argued that they *did* understand board members’ concerns and were willing to work with them. “Use us as a template on how to do this right,” Assistant Coach Dale Ketcham told the board last September. “Develop a policy that won’t jeopardize equitable access.”

Whether Brevard could have developed a workable policy that would accommodate the baseball team and satisfy its Title IX obligations is probably a matter for debate. In the earlier case, *Daniels v. School Board of Brevard County*, the district argued that “any differences

in actual resources [between the girls’ and boys’ teams] were a direct result of the relative success of the booster programs for the respective sports,” says NSBA Senior Attorney Lisa Soronen. But, in the end, that argument didn’t fly.

### **A delicate balance**

One way to confront the Title IX dilemma, Banasik says, is to have one district-wide booster club that supports all sports. That way, the district and parents themselves can get a better idea of whether boys’ and girls’ activities get comparable attention. Banasik notes, however, that districts don’t have to provide dollar-for-dollar matching funds for girls’ and boys’ sports.

Football is a relatively expensive sport, and it costs more than, say, girls’ cross-country. But schools still must take action to ensure “equivalent benefits and services.”

“What you focus on, as a school board, are the benefits,” Banasik says. “Are the benefits comparable? A lot of money may be needed to keep a program afloat like football.” However, if the football team is getting new uniforms year after year, that could be problematic.

Kneessy remembers going to high school in the Midwest in the 1970s, when it was a given that the girls’ gym would be smaller and shabbier than the boys’ one. Girls had to practice at 6 a.m., she recalls, saving prime time for the boys. As for uniforms, “whatever the boys weren’t using, the girls got.”

Those times are gone, and when Brevard looks again at the relative equity of its sports and activities program, it will keep Title IX in mind, Kneessy says. Already, there is talk among parents of boys’ lacrosse team members—a club sport at five high schools—to make it a varsity sport.

Given the extreme financial pressures the district is under, Kneessy is not sure now is the time to expand lacrosse. Because of the weak economy and drastic reductions in state aid, \$52 million is being cut from the district’s \$550 million operating budget this year, although about half can be recouped from leftover federal jobs bill money and other sources.

Times are indeed tough, Kneessy says, and “it would make no sense to cut ninth-grade athletics and turn around and add lacrosse.”

School boards are faced with balancing the number of students who want to participate with the amount of money available, says Harold Bistline, Brevard’s school attorney since 1993. “Then you’ve got to look at Title IX. It’s not easy.” ■

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# Stemming the Dropout Tide

More than half of urban students are dropping out of high school, but the danger signs often appear in elementary and middle school. Taking action now can prevent high school dropouts later

**David Silver, Ron Dietel, and Marisa Saunders**

**A** student drops out of school in the U.S. every 60 seconds. In large urban cities such as Los Angeles, Detroit, Baltimore, Milwaukee, and Las Vegas, more than 50 percent of students fail to graduate with their peers, according to a 2008 study by Editorial Projects in Education.

High schools often take much of the blame for failing to graduate more than 700,000 students each year, but the warning signs are readily apparent by middle school. Our study of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), for example, showed that middle school course failures, absences, and being over-age for a grade level substantially contributed to the district's 52-percent high school dropout rate.

Here are some of the key middle school risk factors, followed by suggestions for what you can do to reduce the number of dropouts in your own district or school.

## **Failing middle school classes**

In a study of more than 39,000 LAUSD high school students, only 18 percent who failed one or more classes each year in middle school ultimately graduated with their peers. Just 28 percent who failed even a single class in sixth grade went on to graduate from high school in four years. This is in stark contrast to students who got Cs or better throughout middle school, 75 percent of whom graduated from high school on time.

We found some resilient students who recovered from a few middle school failures, but most did not. In other words, the earlier a pattern of failure begins, the bleaker the consequences. For students not meeting the most basic expectations of their middle school teachers, academic supports must come early and be forceful to have a reasonable chance of success.

Algebra completion rates were another important academic indicator in our study. Students who passed Algebra 1 by the

end of ninth grade were twice as likely to graduate (70 percent vs. 35 percent) as students who did not. Interventions such as Summer Credit Recovery and Green Dot Public School's intensive school-year algebra programs show promise in changing these odds as late as ninth grade.

Green Dot's program at Los Angeles' Locke High School, for example, contributed to a rise in the number of ninth-graders who enrolled in algebra as well as a 25 percent increase in the passing rate.

## **Attendance, retention, and testing**

Like failing classes, frequent absences usually indicate students' lack of engagement in school. Not surprisingly, poor middle school attendance portends a serious risk of dropping out. In a study of Philadelphia students, for example, researchers found that 83 percent of students whose sixth grade attendance was below 80 percent failed to graduate from high school, even when given an extra year.

In our study, students who eventually dropped out of school had been absent twice as often in seventh and eighth grade than students who completed high school. On average, eventual dropouts missed 14 to 15 days in middle school compared to seven absences for students who went on to graduate.

Being over-age in middle or high school is often a sign of retention in an earlier grade. In a study published by *Teachers College Record*, researchers found that 80 percent of students over-age by one year eventually dropped out of school, and 94 percent of students retained in both elementary and middle school became dropouts—a near certainty.

We found that high school graduation rates dropped significantly for students over-age when they entered ninth grade, 29 percent for over-age students versus 52 percent for other students, a 23 percentage point difference.

Being over-age is just as problematic in high school, where



just one in three students who fail ninth grade will graduate four years later, according to the California Dropout Research Project.

It should be no surprise that test scores are related to high school graduation. In our study, we found that the relationship already was evident in sixth grade. What surprised us was that outcomes were relatively good for all but the very lowest performers on the annual state tests.

Students scoring in the second quartile (between the 25th and 50th percentiles) in sixth grade reading and math graduated 60 percent of the time. Extremely low performers (25th percentile or below in reading *or* math) had only a 41 percent graduation rate. Nearly 70 percent of sixth-graders who had even one score above the median, on the other hand, went on to graduate on time.

### Background matters

Background factors may put students at higher risk. Many studies have found, for example, that males disproportionately drop out of school compared to females.

In our study, 55 percent of males dropped out compared to 42 percent of females. We also found that middle school boys failed nearly twice as many classes as females (2.9 class failures for boys compared to 1.5 for girls). Fifty-eight percent of boys compared to 41 percent of girls failed at least one class in middle school.

Changing schools during the middle school years can disrupt adolescents' progress toward graduation. In our study, although only a small percentage of students changed middle schools, those who did had a greater chance of dropping out. Only 35 percent of students who changed middle schools between seventh and eighth grade graduated from high school in four years.

We also found that middle school students who graduated generally had better-trained teachers than students who dropped out. For example, in middle schools where more than 80 percent of teachers were fully certified, 63 percent of students completed high school. The graduation rate dropped to 51 percent at middle schools with less than 80 percent certified teachers. The same held true at high schools, where just 35 percent of students graduated when fewer than 80 percent of teachers were certified, compared to a 49 percent graduation rate at schools with more than 80 percent of teachers fully certified.

Attending a regular or magnet school also made a difference. Sixty-eight percent of first-time freshmen who attended an LAUSD magnet middle school or center graduated from high school on time compared to 51 percent for students who did not. The impact of magnet school attendance was even greater at the high school level, where 73 percent of magnet high school students graduated compared to 45 percent of non-magnet students.

These large differences in graduation rates might be attrib-

uted, in part, to the theme-based nature of magnet schools, where students choose to attend based on their interest in the theme (humanities, enriched studies, gifted/high ability, math/science/technology, medical careers). Differences also may be explained in part by factors related to parents who are informed and engaged enough to register their children for high-performing magnet schools.

### Lessons learned

Academic history, English skills, attendance, and age relative to classmates were the most important factors in dropping out of high school. Each ranked highly in our analysis of both middle and high school students and each is supported by other studies.

Of course, there is no perfect indicator, and no combination of indicators makes for a foolproof early warning system. Researchers Phillip Gleason and Mark Dynarski found that even a complex statistical model incorrectly identified 58 percent of students who never dropped out. Nonetheless, school districts can improve the likelihood that dropout interventions support the most vulnerable students and take steps to improve the chances for everyone.

First, find out where you are. Be sure data is being shared with the board, including information between schools and districts, and at the state level. What are the year-to-year trends?

Second, set targets for improvement. If your school and district goals don't already include a specific target for reducing the number of dropouts, add one. Reports to the community and public should provide accurate progress on reaching those goals, even if the news is not positive. Historically, dropout rates have been tracked in very different ways, many of which obscured as often as they shed light on the extent of the dropout problem. In 2005, all 50 governors agreed to follow a new and better standard. A majority of states now report "NGA graduation rates" but many others have not yet followed through on the promise. Without reliable dropout statistics, districts have little hope of recognizing promising solutions, even where they are in place.

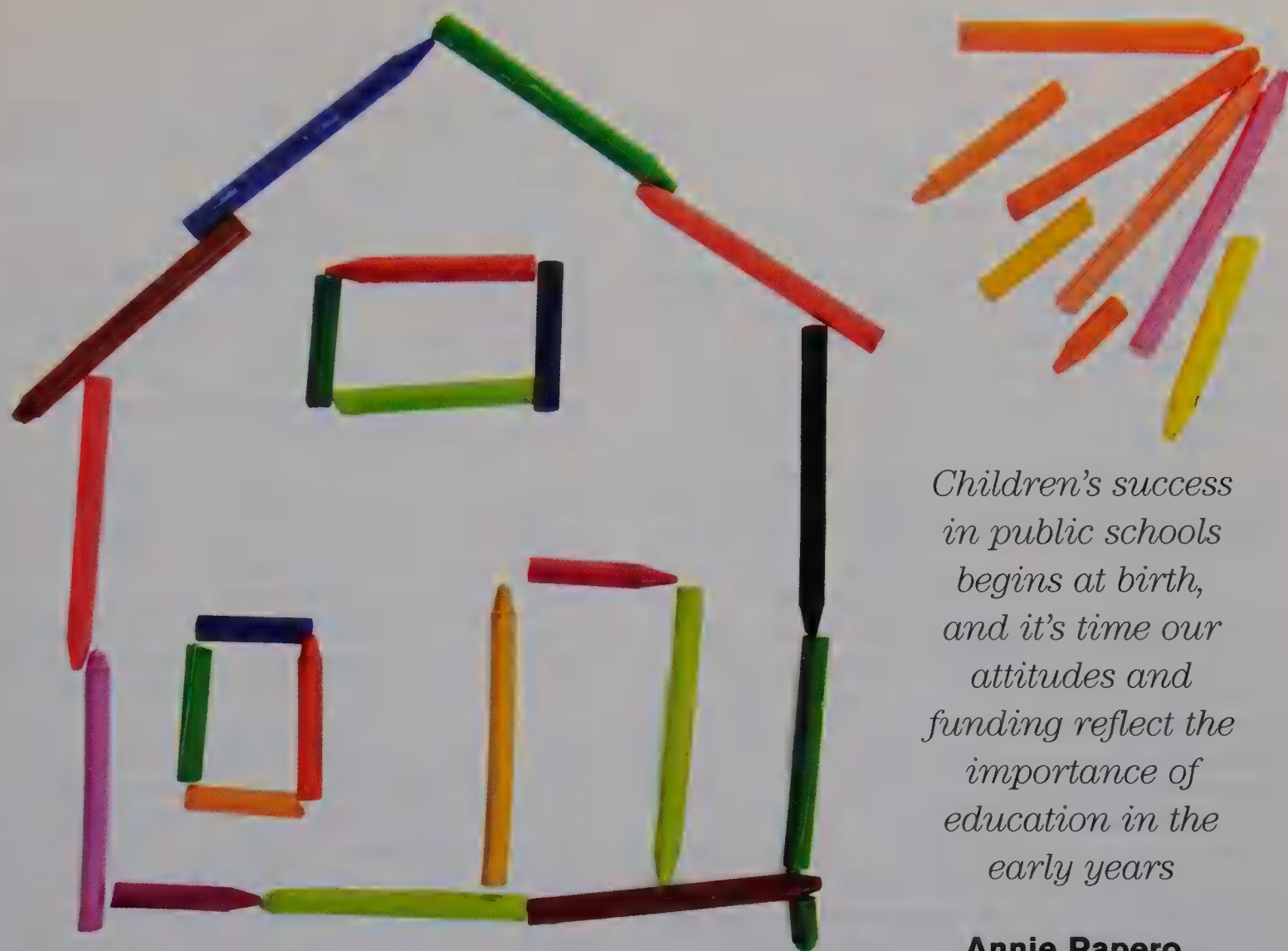
Third, develop, implement, and evaluate a master plan for reducing your dropout rate.

Dropout prevention should start in the early elementary grades, even in schools with modest rates. That we act today is imperative. In the time it took you to read this article, five more students have dropped out. ■

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*Children's success  
in public schools  
begins at birth,  
and it's time our  
attitudes and  
funding reflect the  
importance of  
education in the  
early years*

**Annie Papero**

# The Wonder Years

W

hat if every child entered kindergarten ready to learn? What a difference it would make to school leaders, families, and our society if all children received high-quality

care during their first three years of life. Evidence continues to grow that school success begins at birth. Our children will never achieve at their highest levels until we change our attitudes—and commit money and resources—to reflect the importance of the first three years of life.

As education leaders, we need to be aware of the established links between very early childhood experiences and later achievement. School leaders—who shoulder the responsibility of raising achievement—are in an extraordinary position to advocate for high-quality care for infants and toddlers. They can make a strong argument that early

childhood education is a crucial part of any plan for student achievement and success.

## **The risks of growing up poor**

Research overwhelmingly confirms the role of early childhood education in later school success. In spite of this, many in public education pay little attention to it, perhaps because teacher and school leaders believe it's out of their sphere of influence.

Although we typically view kindergarten as the beginning of formal schooling, it actually is a continuation of all the learning that has come before. For some children, the early years provide a wealth of developmental riches. In stark contrast, some children face a paucity of opportunity and start out far behind.

One well-recognized risk factor for young children is growing up poor. Children make up a quarter of the U.S. population. However, they are disproportionately represented in poverty, accounting for 35 percent of the nation's



poor. Children under age 6 are the poorest demographic group in our country—important to note because, not surprisingly, poverty is more detrimental to the development of young children than to that of older children.

Poverty is associated with lower levels of school achievement and higher levels of behavioral problems. Early poverty shapes later school achievement in many ways. One factor is how language is used in each child's environment. Both parents and children from more affluent, professional backgrounds possess vocabularies that are twice the size of those used by parents and children on welfare. Research shows that these differences in language noted in children when they were 3 were found to be predictors of vocabulary and language development when they were 9 and 10.

Another risk factor faced by infants and toddlers is having a depressed or severely stressed primary caregiver. When a caregiver is unable, for any reason, to establish a warm, responsive relationship with a very young child, development can be affected. The risks include poorer regulation of negative emotion, higher levels of insecure attachment, lower rates of compliance, cognitive and language delays, and lower levels of social competence.

Many of these risks have the potential to alter children's future development paths. For example, the quality of an infant's attachment to a caregiver predicts later social competence, empathy, self-esteem, flexibility, and problem-solving abilities.

Interestingly, the ages of 6 months to 18 months appear to be particularly sensitive to the effects of the quality of caregiving. Many researchers have found that impairments in caregiving during this window of development lead to persistent developmental problems including cognitive impairment, difficulty with peers, hyperactivity, and difficulty regulating attention and emotion—even if conditions subsequently improve for these children.

Children learn to successfully express and regulate emotion through caring, ongoing interactions with significant others in their lives. This self-regulation is a skill that any educator recognizes as important for academic and social success in school.

### **That ship has sailed**

Public schools face significant challenges when children arrive for kindergarten with vastly different levels of development. Metaphorically, a majority of children are on a ship that departs at birth, sailing at a strong clip towards higher developmental levels, fueled by rich environments and quality interactions. Unfortunately, some children are left on shore, lacking the responsive interactions and enriched environments that would carry them along.

We expect those left on shore to catch up and perform at the same levels academically as those who have been on the

ship for five years already. It would be quite the feat for a young child with few resources to swim fast enough to climb aboard that ship.

Both sets of children may sit in the same classroom with the same teacher at age 5. But some children have an easier time surrounded by familiar knowledge and skills, while others must simultaneously learn academics and stay afloat in a world where they have no prior experience and far fewer applicable skills. Some very capable and resilient children manage to excel under these difficult circumstances, while many more do not.

It is our responsibility to make sure all children have a chance at academic success. With such unequal starting points, we face a very difficult task. One child may be ready for advanced math, while another child is struggling to focus and learn in the classroom.

It is time for all of us, especially education leaders who are in the position to advocate nationwide, to declare that all children should be on that ship before it sails.

### **The role of ■ high-quality program**

Early high-quality programs for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers that are accessible and affordable to all families have the greatest potential to help with this goal. Early high-quality care has been found to improve the cognitive, language, and social development of children, particularly those who are low-income, with effects that stretch into the early school years.

Group size, caregiver/child ratio, adult responsiveness, and continuity are some of the factors that determine the quality of care. Infants need to form trusting relationships with a primary care provider. Frequent changes in caregiving have been found to be related to insecure attachment and more problematic behaviors. Many low-income parents are more likely to seek out informal arrangements with relatives or other community members. This type of care has the potential to be less stable than center-based care. Frequent daycare changes are associated with insecure attachment and lower levels of social competence.

In fact, children's relationships with trusted teachers appear to provide children with some of the same benefits as a secure attachment to a parent. In addition, research has found that stability of early care also appears to enhance school adjustment in first grade.

A low child-to-adult ratio is also an important factor in high-quality care. Higher child-to-adult ratios have been found to result in elevated stress levels in children. Sustained, elevated levels of cortisol production in children have been linked to chronic illness and to difficulties concentrating and controlling anger.

### **Economic benefits**

High-quality early childhood programs can produce signifi-



## More early childhood information

cant economic benefits to our society. Research studies that have followed children for more than 40 years are now showing savings of \$13 or more for every dollar spent 40 years ago on intervention for 3- and 4-year-old children at risk.

The children who received half-day preschool paired with weekly home visits by their teachers when they were 3 and 4 have been found longitudinally to have higher levels of school achievement, reduced pregnancy and delinquency rates in adolescence, higher high school graduation rates, higher levels of college attendance, increased employment, and lower rates of single parenthood.

Would even earlier intervention, before the age of 3, lead to even greater economic savings and a higher level of student achievement? A 1995 review of model intervention programs showed that IQ effects produced persisted for the longest amount of time among the children who were participants in the two experimental studies that enrolled them as infants in full-day programs.

The Carolina Abecedarian Project, which provided full-day care for low-income children beginning during the first three months of life, has produced evidence that the children who received intervention sustained an IQ advantage over their peers through adulthood, achieved higher levels in reading and math, completed more years of schooling, had lower rates of drug use and early parenthood, and had higher rates of college enrollment and employment.

In a subsequent experiment, researchers provided intervention beginning in kindergarten instead of infancy. Although the school-age intervention aided children's academic achievement, it did not impact their IQs and its effects were significantly weaker than they were for the children who received services as infants.

Often, people object to early childhood programs because they believe that society should not pay for the failure of individuals to provide for themselves and their children. To reframe that argument, consider that it may be preferable to invest in early, high-quality programs that improve student achievement than to pay a much greater sum for remedial education, juvenile detention, adult incarceration, and welfare payments. Research suggests that financial investment in the first few years of life would simultaneously save money and improve the conditions of poverty.

### Advocate for early childhood

As school leaders, we serve all children, from the poorest of the poor to those who come from the wealthiest families. We exist in every community, and we have a voice that needs to be heard. The issue of early care affects us directly.

We can bring all individuals involved in the care and education of children from birth through adulthood to the same table to talk about what is working or not working for our

NSBA's Center for Public Education offers many resources on prekindergarten programs, including information on early childhood education research, how to build support for pre-k programs in your district, and a toolkit to assist in creating a high-quality pre-k program. This information and more can be found at [www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Pre-kindergarten](http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Pre-kindergarten).

children. We can each learn more about the resources and gaps in our communities for the families with young children, and we can advocate for improvements that include better care for infants and toddlers.

We can advocate in our own communities and at the national level, drawing attention to the early years, giving voice to a community of educators and children who receive very little of society's attention or resources. We are in the position to spread the word that K-12 public schools alone can not make up for the deficiencies experienced by so many children during the first five years of life. We can demand a more equal starting line for all children when they reach our schools.

### From diapers to decimals

Any serious discussion of closing the achievement gap, almost by definition, must include a discussion of the provisions being made for infants and toddlers. For those children who arrive without adequate experiences, we are in the position to advocate for interventions that make sense from a developmental perspective, providing our most challenged children with the opportunities to form strong relationships with reliable adults, and not just provide for the practice of rote facts and measurable academic skills.

Understanding the research is the first step for us as leaders in education and for those who advocate for the children in this country. Research strongly suggests that we would experience higher levels of achievement in our public schools if we as a society ensure that all of our infants and toddlers are provided with the opportunity to relate to adults who provide responsive, sensitive care.

Prekindergarten is not the starting line. The journey began at birth, leaving many children behind. From diapers to decimals, development is a continuum, and we cannot as a society continue to view the first five years of life as a "private domain." Children's success in our public schools begins at birth, and both our attitudes and our funding structures should reflect that knowledge. ■

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## Going Nowhere Fast

*Two education documentaries created headlines and national conversations with their conflicting claims about public education. But does the research support either of their messages?*

A new buzz-worthy film documentary casts a harsh spotlight on public education as told through the emotional stories of anxious students and their parents. Nope, it's not "Waiting for Superman." That was last year's buzz-worthy education documentary. "Superman" blames public schools and policymakers for expecting too little for urban students, leaving them unprepared for the future.

This new film is called "Race to Nowhere." It blames schools and policymakers for creating a generation of stressed students, leaving them unprepared for their future. The similarity to "Superman" stops here. "Nowhere" alleges that the problem is that we expect *too much* of our young people. Students are doing too much homework, taking too many Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and competing for too few seats in competitive colleges. The result, according to the film's press materials, is nothing less than "unhealthy, disengaged, unprepared and stressed-out youth."

The power in these films stems from their real-life stories. These young people deserve our sympathy and our effort to improve their situations. At the same time, we need to be very careful about the conclusions we draw from these stories, and the public policies we call for in response.

The message of "Race to Nowhere" has struck a nerve in a lot of communities. It doesn't have a major film distributor, being shown instead through locally organized screenings across the country, many in schools. Its website reports that already more than 2,000 such screenings have taken place, enough to attract coverage in major media outlets. It also has prompted countless conversations at PTA meetings, book clubs, grocery stores, and swimming pools across America.

### Faulty generalizations

Full disclosure here: I have not seen either film. Everything reported here is based on promotional materials and websites the producers set up to engage community activism in support of their respective agendas. But it's clear enough that the producers for both films make what logisticians call faulty generalizations.

"Waiting for Superman" tracks the experiences of families gambling their children will win in a lottery for seats in high-performing charter schools. Many of them see it as the best chance their child has for a good education.

The producers then use this to make the case for, in their words, "lifting the cap on public charter schools." But why? The most rigorous study of charter schools shows that barely 1 in 5 charter

schools outperforms its traditional public school counterpart while 1 in 3 *underperforms* the school its students would have typically attended (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009).

Parents don't care if a school is a "charter," only that it is "high-performing." And creating more charter schools wouldn't guarantee better schools. Our focus would be better spent on helping all public schools, charters and traditional alike, serve their students more effectively.

"Race to Nowhere" likewise examines the lives of students in distress. In this case, however, the students are high performers. The filmmakers make many claims, too many to address here. But I will focus on two top attention-grabbers: students do too much homework and it's too hard to get into college.

### Too much homework?

Based purely on my own personal, non-scientific, anecdotal assessment, I can say plenty of parents are upset about the amount of homework schools are assigning their children. These parents' concern is not totally misplaced because research shows that too much homework can produce diminishing returns, especially in the early grades. But, done in the appropriate amount, homework is shown to have academic benefits.

Four years ago, NSBA's Center for Public Education (CPE) published a research review on the value of homework.

Researchers Harris Cooper, Jorgianne Robinson, and Erika Patall find little evidence that homework relates to better academic performance in elementary school, although a small amount may help children develop good work habits.



By middle school, however, up to an hour of homework each night is associated with higher achievement, and 1.5 to 2.5 hours nightly for high schoolers is optimal. Cooper suggests a good rule of thumb is 10 minutes of homework for each grade, so that first graders would have 10 minutes, second graders, 20 minutes, etc.

“Race to Nowhere” features students whose homework load is so severe it causes sleep deprivation, poor eating habits, and worse. Do these students exist in our schools? Undoubtedly, yes. Are they typical? Let’s look at the data. A study of high school students by the National Center for Education Statistics showed that a majority of the class of 2004—two out of three—reported doing less than six hours of homework each week whether in or out of school.

One in five said they did between seven and 12 hours each week, which according to research is the most effective time allotted to homework by high school students. Homework consumed more than 13 hours weekly for only one in 10 seniors.

While we should be on the lookout for stressed and overworked students, we should not mistake their experience as typical. Overall, the homework problem among high school students seems to be doing too little, not too much.

### Competitive college admissions?

CPE asked the question, “Is it harder to get into college now?” in an original study by senior policy analyst Jim Hull. What he found runs counter to many popular reports of shrinking possibilities. In fact, an average applicant in 2004 had the same likelihood of acceptance to a competitive college as a similar student in 1992. About three-fourths of average students were accepted into four-year competitive colleges then and continue to be now.

The students portrayed in “Race to Nowhere” tended to be focused on the highly selective colleges. What about their chances of being admitted to one?

Hull found that the top students in 2004 actually had a slightly higher chance of admissions to a top college than their 1992 peers did.

If it’s the same—or for top students easier—to be accepted into competitive colleges, where is the pressure coming from? The producers find fault in a lot of places: parents, schools wanting to improve their bragging rights, policy-makers who fear the U.S. is losing its international standing.

The producers also blame the increase in AP course-taking. It’s an ironic charge, because the increase in rigorous course-taking in high school has been a big contributor in the improvement of college acceptance rates among minority and low-income students.

### Knowing the difference

Each movie seems to cancel out the other’s message. The families in “Waiting for Superman” wanted the opportunity to send their children to high-performing schools with rigorous curricula, high test scores, and longer hours. “The Race

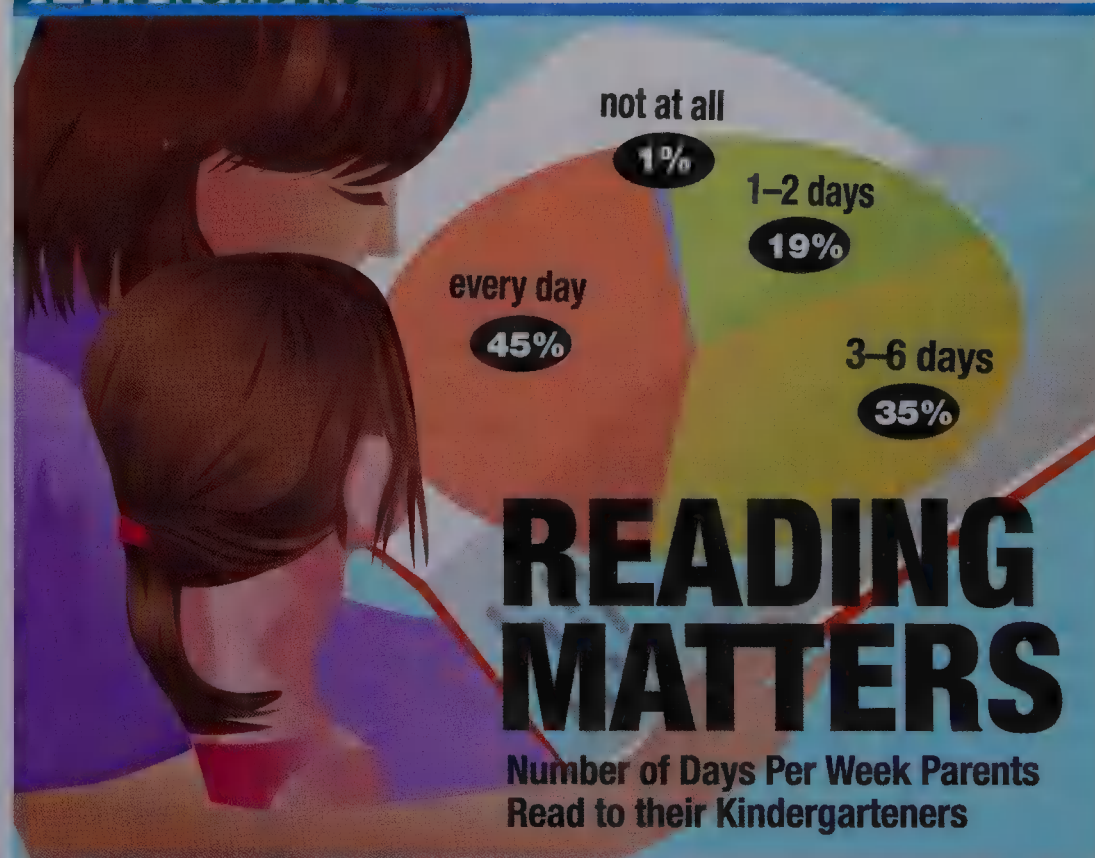
to Nowhere” families tend to be in high-performing schools, yet the producers fault the high-pressure environment and call for a cap on the hours spent on schoolwork, fewer or no AP courses, and limits on testing.

It’s always good to remind ourselves that the majority of parents are satisfied with their public schools. However, the value of films like “Waiting for Superman” and “Race to Nowhere” is that they draw our attention to students or groups of students for whom everything is not OK.

To craft effective policies to help these students, policymakers and school leaders need to understand the scope of the problem and the evidence for the proposed solutions. Compelling stories make for good drama, but don’t always make good public policy. It’s important to know the difference. ■

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## BY THE NUMBERS



Data provided by the Center for Public Education.



## Code of Conduct

*Reviewing and auditing your hiring and supervision practices for athletic coaches will significantly limit potential liability and better protect your student athletes*

**T**he police contact your school district as part of a criminal investigation—a student has alleged that a volunteer coach for one of the district's sports teams repeatedly groped the student during practices. In another case, parents file a lawsuit alleging negligent supervision because their child suffered a concussion during a team practice.

Scenarios like these unfortunately are not uncommon in school districts. In recent years, allegations of inappropriate conduct by coaches who supervise interscholastic sports have increased, resulting in devastating consequences for students and school communities. In addition, inappropriate conduct has resulted in numerous claims being filed against school districts.

Also, the number of cases involving student athletes who suffer severe injury or death during sporting events or practices is on the rise, as are claims against school districts for negligent supervision of student athletes and athletic coaches.

What can you as school leaders do to reduce or prevent liability stemming from incidents involving athletic coaches? Auditing hiring practices for athletic coaches will significantly reduce potential liability that may arise when inadequate or inconsistent hiring practices are in place.

### The hiring process

Many school districts use a centralized hiring process for teaching and non-teaching staff, but allow decisions regarding the hiring and training of athletic coaches to be made at a departmental or site level. While this method has many benefits, if it does not involve adequate communication with district-level administrators, it may lead to inconsistent or inappropriate hiring and supervision practices.

Departmental or site-level staff may be particularly qualified to assess whether candidates for coaching positions would be a good fit for their department or site, but they may not have knowledge of the district's hiring practices or be adequately trained in screening candidates for employment.

In addition, the school's interest in getting an employee in place immediately may conflict with the district's multi-step hiring process, which may require board approval and background checks before an employee is hired. Collaboration among the athletic department, the school site, and the human resources department in making decisions about the selection of coaches is essential to ensure that the best candidates are selected.

### Background checks

No federal law requires districts to conduct background checks on employees

or volunteers who work with or supervise students. A number of states require that districts submit fingerprints of candidates for employment to the U.S. Department of Justice for processing. Other states only require that the fingerprints be run through the state's criminal database. Some states do not impose any type of fingerprint requirement on interscholastic coaches employed by school districts or serving in voluntary positions coaching interscholastic athletic teams.

The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) in December 2010 completed a report of selected cases involving public and private schools that hired or retained individuals with a history of sexual misconduct (Report 11-200). The report found that one of the primary factors that resulted in the employment of sex offenders was that districts did not perform pre-employment criminal history checks. Another factor: They did the checks but did not run the fingerprints through a national criminal database.

Because state law varies extensively on fingerprinting requirements for employees or volunteers, it is important that district policies and procedures comply with the applicable state law. Keep in mind that the state law regarding fingerprinting athletic coaches sets a "floor" or minimum requirement, which school districts may exceed.

In those states where there is no fingerprinting requirement, or where the law requires only that fingerprints be processed through the state's criminal database, districts should consider whether to impose a more stringent requirement and process fingerprints through both the state and federal criminal databases.



It also is imperative to consider whether the background screening process used for athletic coaches provides for subsequent notification if an employee is arrested after the initial background check. If not, consider conducting background checks on a recurring basis so that the district learns of any criminal misconduct that occurs after the initial check.

### Application process

In any hiring process, the job posting must state the necessary qualifications and experience for the position. Frequently, job descriptions for athletic coaches are nonexistent, vague, or outdated. Inadequate or incomplete job descriptions may create significant issues for districts, particularly related to evaluation, discipline, or termination of a coach because there are no standards on which to base the actions.

State and federal laws regarding training for athletic coaches are constantly evolving as new issues arise. For example, recent incidents of head injuries to student athletes prompted Congress to consider the "Protecting Student Athletes from Concussions Act of 2011."

If this bill becomes law, it will impose new requirements on districts to create concussion management plans. This bill demonstrates why it is important to periodically review job descriptions and postings for coaching positions to ensure that the job requirements are accurate, and the training and experience requirements are listed and comport with district needs and state and federal law.

It is essential that the administrators charged with reviewing applications and making hiring decisions conduct a thorough review of the application materials. They must follow up with the candidate on any inconsistent or incomplete statements made in the application and supporting materials.

### Employment status

The employment status of an athletic coach has a significant impact on district

options if the coach turns out to be a poor fit or engages in actual misconduct. Coaches may fall into any of the following categories:

- Existing teaching or nonteaching employees of the district who accept the coaching position as an adjunct assignment;

- A community member hired by the district;

- A parent and or community member who volunteers to coach the team and is not an employee of the district.

For each category, the coach should be notified of his or her status in the coaching position. The terms of employment should be clearly articulated in the offer letter to the employee or in a contract between the employee and the district.

Volunteer athletic coaches should similarly be notified of their status and that they may be released from serving as a coach at any time. Such notice will help to avoid any future claims by the coach that he or she was not notified of his or her limited term or at-will status in the district.

### Supervision

In addition to using best practices for hiring athletic coaches, school districts may reduce their potential liability by ensuring that athletic coaches are adequately supervised.

Such supervision includes making sure that athletic coaches satisfy all training requirements imposed by state and federal law and district policy. Also, training records should be periodically reviewed to ensure that certifications are current. District officials should review

training requirements listed in job postings and job descriptions for athletic coaches. They should determine whether the level of training required is adequate for the particular sport and the age of the student athletes.

A clear chain of supervision of athletic coaches and early communication between the various supervisors on any issues that arise should exist. For instance, if the site principal is directly responsible for supervising the coach of one of the school's sports teams, he or she should communicate with the athletic director and the district's human resources department when/if any concerns arise. This communication structure involves all necessary decision-makers and allows for prompt and immediate corrective action to be taken as necessary.

Consider who in the district is responsible for evaluating a coach's job performance and working with the coach to implement any corrective actions. Review the process for making decisions regarding discipline and termination of coaches to ensure that a consistent process is in place.

Following this suggested audit process can help protect student athletes and reduce your school district's exposure to liability. ■

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## Audit checklist

- Review your process for conducting background checks for employees and volunteers who supervise athletic activities.
- Review job descriptions for athletic coaching positions and related application forms.
- Review your process for screening applications and selecting candidates for an interview.
- Review your policies for hiring athletic coaches and the process for notifying new hires of their employment status.
- Review your policies and practices relative to training requirements for athletic coaches.



## R-E-S-P-E-C-T

*In a tight economy, your employees likely feel undervalued and unappreciated. If you want your staff to do everything they can for children, start by treating them like family*

**G**rowing up in an Irish Catholic clan with six siblings and an extended family that could populate a small city, I was instilled with one key value: family first.

That same value applies to organizational communications. Now, more than ever, it is vital that school leaders focus on communicating with their family members—their employees—first.

With ideologues using the recession and state budget deficits to bash government employees, break teachers unions, and dismantle public schools

as we know them, educators are feeling undervalued and unappreciated.

Stagnant salaries, growing accountability pressures, and too many “my way or the highway” administrators are making teachers feel more like serfs than professionals. That same malaise is spreading to custodians, maintenance workers, cafeteria managers, secretaries, principals, and central office staff. Demoralized people with inadequate resources and support cannot perform at peak levels. As researchers have said, teacher working conditions become students’ learning

conditions.

If we want public school employees to personalize education for every child, respond graciously to every parent request, and spur higher test scores than China, we need to start treating them with more respect.

We also need to start paying less attention to outcomes like test scores and more attention to creating the working conditions that foster and support high-performing teams and better student learning. It is time to take care of our school family first.

### Value-driven leadership

One of the hallmarks of high-performing organizations is value-driven leadership. If school board members, superintendents, central office administrators, principals, directors, managers, and supervisors demonstrate the character and interpersonal dynamics they expect from others, and hold each other accountable for lapses, employees will follow.

On the other hand, if the organization’s core values are unclear, or seem relegated to posters on the wall and school board mission statements, employee cynicism and distrust will only increase.

Shared accountability is critical. When school board members berate employees during public meetings, or





when top administrators fail to sanction colleagues who are acting inappropriately, any talk about treating students, staff, and parents with respect and dignity will fall on deaf ears, and rightly so.

This does not mean that low-performing employees, often the first to run to school board members with their complaints, should go unchallenged. Research shows that keeping incompetent workers or slackers on the payroll hurts employee morale and team performance.

School board members and superintendents especially need to be cognizant of this when they ask leaders to turn a district, or specific schools, around. Change is tough, and some long-standing team members may no longer be the best fit for the job.

Confronting difficult challenges and having tough conversations are part of value-driven leadership. Making change does not equate to treating people disrespectfully. The best leaders are optimists with high standards whose compelling vision and integrity make people want to follow them.

### **Soft stuff is the hard stuff**

Having worked in private industry, I often find it ironic that the people who seem to advocate that schools run like a business seem to know the least about what really works in private industry.

Despite all the hype and tough talk, research business scholars clearly show that the soft stuff of culture, climate, and managing people really is the hard stuff when it comes to generating more profit and greater returns for shareholders.

Unfortunately, the research-to-practice pipeline in business is as slow as the one feeding public schools. With media hype glamorizing former CEOs like “neutron” Jack Welch and making Donald Trump’s “You’re fired” a popular catchphrase, it’s little wonder elected officials are spouting such nonsense

and applying it to public schools.

That could be why a study by Harris Interactive/Yammer, released in June, showed that only 39 percent of U.S. workers respect their managers and only 19 percent of employees say they learn a lot from them.

Clearly, the short-term focus on profit and stockholder gain that wrecked the economy also has wrecked employee morale. Typically, dips in productivity, or mass exodus by top performers, will follow.

### **Systems alignment**

Creating a family-first organization means aligning all systems accordingly, particularly human resources policies and practices. This includes teacher recruitment, retention, and performance incentives.

If we want more teamwork and collaboration, we need to recognize and reward it. If individual performance is what counts, then that is what the organization should show it values. If the desired outcomes for students require a combination of both, and given the complexity of public schooling today this is likely, then the system we set up needs to reflect reality.

Morale and productivity suffer when systems, not people, are out of whack. Leaders constantly have to adjust even the most thoughtful and well-intentioned plans based on employee feedback and evidence about unintended consequences.

On the surface, for example, providing incentives that tie teacher pay to student performance seems logical. After all, business routinely rewards salespeople and other employees with bonuses for hitting financial goals.

The dirty little secret most frontline business workers know is that companies have to constantly change the rules to keep employees from making too much money or gaming the system. When focused on the bottom line of making money, employees will figure out ways to do so, much to the

chagrin of business leaders, who see their corporate reputations plummet because of poor customer service or ethical lapses.

If test scores are the only thing that matters, educators will find a way to deliver, often at the expense of delving deeply into relevant curriculum in non-tested areas. Reading is the king of the curriculum, but arts, social studies, career and technical education courses, co-curricular activities, and athletics nourish the soul and spark creativity.

While most achievement score gains reflect hard work by teachers and students and deserve to be celebrated, a deeper look may, in some cases, reveal that fewer kids are being tested or that low-performing and disabled students are cycling endlessly through nontested courses.

Too many incentive plans and pay-for-performance schemes fail to recognize that educating children well is a team sport. And yes, research shows that classroom teachers have a tremendous effect on student learning, at least as measured by standardized test scores.

However, scholars also note that it is exceedingly difficult to parse out the influence of the teacher of record from the impact of specialists, counselors, teacher assistants, and others who interact and work with students daily. That is why more progressive plans reward whole teams and schools rather than just a few individuals, and encompass more than just test scores.

Keeping an eye out for unintended consequences is good stewardship of taxpayer dollars and the public’s trust. Listening more to teachers, principals, and other school-based employees is a good place to start. Wise leaders understand that they have two ears and one mouth for a reason. ■

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## Changing the System

*The desire for school change is great, but much of the advice on how to lead for change is profoundly frustrating. Follow these five 'shifts' to see change for the better*

It is a rare board member or school leader who believes, "My mandate is to keep things as they are and ensure that we do not improve." Almost everyone wants change, whether it is helping students meet the demands of global competition, helping teachers and administrators improve their skills to improve student performance, or helping systems leaders operate more efficiently to conserve resources in profoundly challenging times.

While the appetite for change is great, the leadership literature on systems change can be overwhelming and profoundly frustrating. Scholars of the highest rank have outlined the elements of successful change leadership in comprehensive and accessible fashion, but the vast majority of efforts fail.

Here are five suggestions for how we can shift and make successful changes in our systems:

### From strategic planning to action

Today's strategic plans are significantly shorter than those of a decade ago as the emphasis of effective processes has shifted from producing an elegant document to directly monitoring the strategies themselves.

In the past, strategic planning processes consumed enormous quantities of time and resources for districts, often without actually leading to specific actions by the administrators and teachers who implement the plan. Evidence from research I conducted earlier this year suggests that fewer priorities are

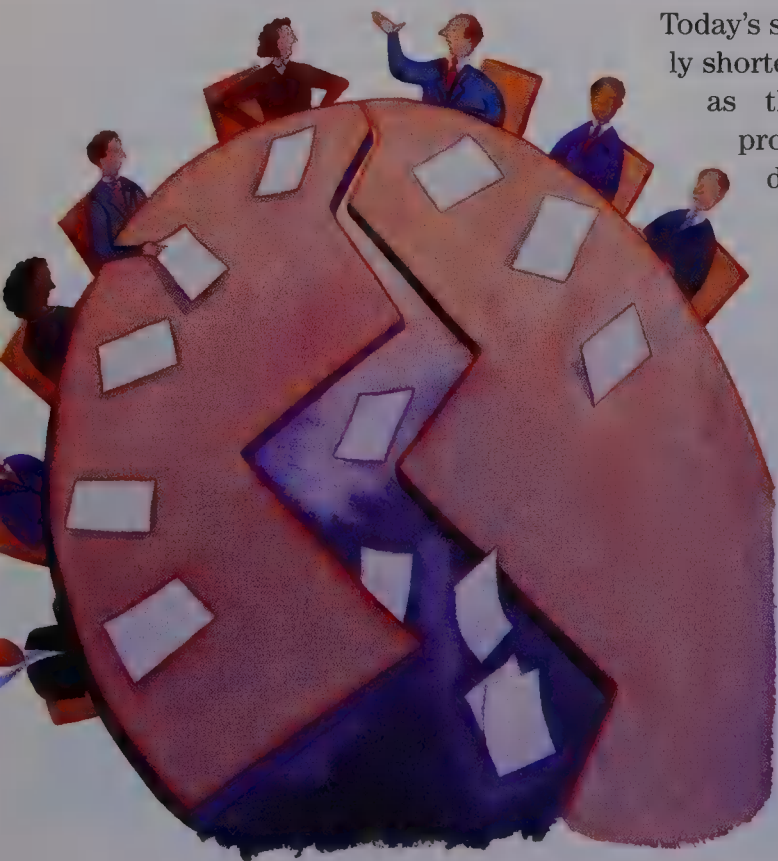
directly associated with improved student results. This supports my earlier research that showed strategic plans can and should be reduced to only a few pages at the district level and to a single page for individual schools.

### From '5 to 7 years' to 'now'

When change efforts run into trouble, a typical bromide often tossed off with a sigh is, "Well, don't you know that research shows that systems change takes at least five to seven years?" With that statement, another well-intentioned grand plan sinks into the organizational quicksand.

But think for a moment. A significant body of published research, in this magazine and academic journals, documents many cases of effective change that took place in a single school year—sometimes within a single semester. Look at it this way: What would you do if there were unsafe conditions in the school cafeteria or at a busy crosswalk in front of the school? No one would tolerate the excuse that "it takes five to seven years to change." If it's a matter of health and safety, they would demand immediate change.

The only question, therefore, is whether student learning is a health and safety issue. Evidence from the Alliance for Excellent Education makes clear that school success meets these criteria, as students who fail spend billions more in Medicaid and uninsured medical care costs than those who remain in school. Once literacy becomes a health and safety issue, no one will settle for a five-year plan.





## From dips to short-term wins

When new initiatives start, many leaders are taught to expect an implementation dip—that is, a decrease in performance after the change begins. It's not clear why any organization would plan for failure when short-term wins are critical to sustain momentum for change. If past efforts resulted in a dip, then the cause of that dip should be rigorously analyzed and adjustments should be made before the next change effort.

## From 'vision' to 'implementation'

Conventional wisdom holds that a hallmark of effective leadership is creating a compelling vision of the future. In fact, those who adhere to Abraham Zalesnik's "leadership/management" dichotomy—originally articulated in 1977—suggest that leaders create the vision and managers are the less lofty folk who merely implement it.

This inappropriate distinction between leaders and managers has led to a generation of university courses and innumerable professional development conferences that exalt leadership but barely mention management.

An exciting vision that is not implemented effectively does not inspire employees; instead, it breeds cynicism among people who have seen one vision after another introduced with great fanfare only to quickly fade

away, eclipsed by the next grand vision.

Nevertheless, the consulting industry remains full of people who offer to help craft just the right vision, typically in a bucolic setting with all the creature comforts necessary for deep thinking, while the implementation must be done in an intensely active classroom with a leaking roof and thin walls.

Here's a suggestion: Have your next strategic planning meeting inside one of your most challenging schools, preferably in a classroom where it will be implemented.

## From 'buy-in' to critical thinking

Perhaps the most important shift in effective systems change is moving from the need for buy-in—or, more precisely, the illusion of buy-in—to a process of constructive critical thinking. The best example of illusory buy-in occurred during the frantic days of December 2010 as states completed their Race to the Top applications. Board members, union presidents, superintendents, parent associations, and other groups were asked to endorse documents that had not even been written.

Any veteran of board meetings knows there are two types of silence—one that signals assent and one that indicates the expression of contrary

views is dangerous and unwelcome. A far better approach is to welcome constructive critical thinking with such questions as: What are other decisions that we could consider? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative? What will be the indicators that we made the right decision? What will be the indicators that we need to make a midcourse correction and adjust our decision? What will we do if we are wrong?

In landmark research on process fairness, W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne found that employees who disagree with a decision are far more likely to support its implementation when they believe the process was fair and they had the opportunity to express their views in a safe and open environment.

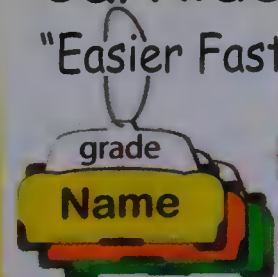
Before you launch your next systems change initiative, reflect on what worked—and what didn't—the last time you attempted systems-level change, and consider these five shifts as ways to improve your probability of success. ■

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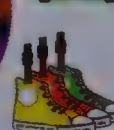
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## Creative Reinvention

*The economic downturn has meant declining enrollment for many districts. One New York district came up with a creative way to attract new students and keep its doors open*

**E**nrollment is declining in many school districts around the country. The causes vary. A common scenario is when a major employer moves out of town or a national chain store decides to close a regional branch. Families move to other towns in search of job opportunities. Home prices fall. Downtown merchants no longer have the customer traffic necessary to survive. Soon, they too close up shop and move away, leaving behind more unemployment. These economic stressors ultimately lead to

fewer students in the area districts.

Declining enrollment also occurs in areas where mining, logging, or fishing industries are major employers. As natural resources diminish or businesses close, families also may make the decision to leave the area in search of other employment. Similarly, declining enrollment may result from military bases closing. Legislative actions that limit economic expansion or place restrictions on land development also may affect enrollment.

### Dealing with decline

School boards use a variety of strategies to deal with declining enrollment. Consolidation with other districts is common. However, while this cost-cutting measure may result in more efficient use of available resources, it could have some unintended consequences. For example, buildings that remain in operation may become overcrowded. Other potential problems include reduced academic performance and increased student behavioral issues,

particularly violence between students from different areas.

Other challenges come with consolidation. For example, when more students are crowded into one facility, athletic facilities may not be able to withstand the increased use. Combining schools also increases competition to participate on sport teams.

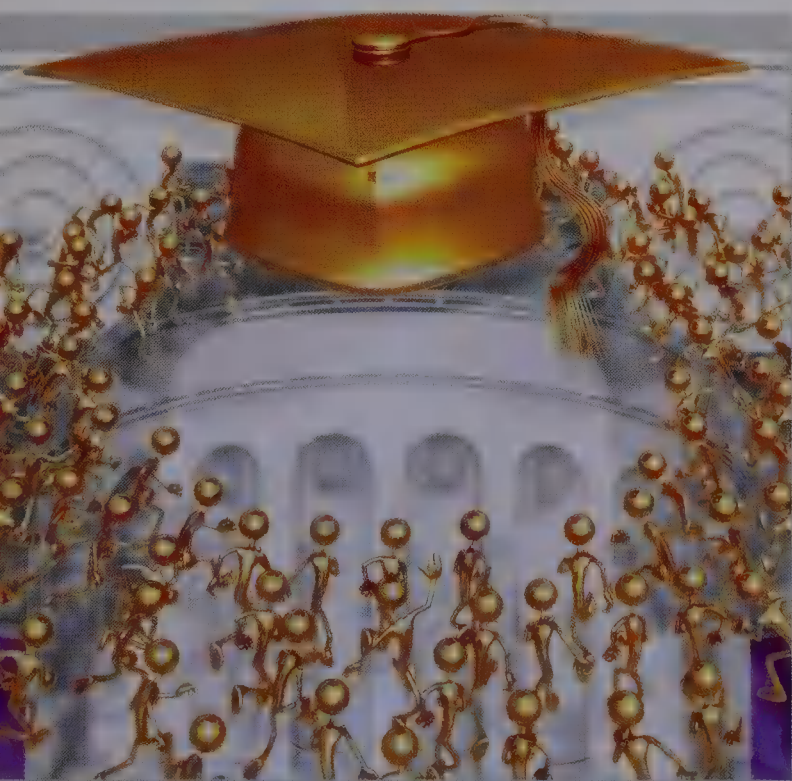
Merging districts often find that transportation difficulties arise for teachers and students. In some rural areas, school district consolidation is simply not an option. Long commuting distances impose a travel time burden on students.

When consolidation is off the table, districts may attempt to cope with declining enrollment with teacher layoffs, increased class sizes, and building closures.

### Creative alternative

New York's Newcomb Central School District met the challenges of declining enrollment with a creative solution. Newcomb is a small town located in the heart of the 6.1 million-acre Adirondack Park, which is controlled by the state's Forest Preserve and the Adirondack Park Agency. About 1 million acres in the park are classified as wilderness. Development and construction in the remaining area are controlled by state agencies. The population density in the park is only 2.5 persons per square mile. Newcomb's year-round population is 362.

Newcomb experienced a decline in the lumber industry. Five years ago, the district had 57 students in a building capable of holding 300. A year later, that number dropped to 55. Recognizing that consolidation with





another district was not practical, Newcomb officials searched for another solution. Clark "Skip" Hults, the district's new superintendent, introduced a way to revitalize the district: accepting tuition students. But he didn't intend to limit recruitment to students from neighboring districts. Instead, he wanted to draw adolescents from around the world.

Newcomb created a partnership with an agency that screens and matches international students with districts around the country. Hults reports that enrollment is currently 86, with 30 percent of high school enrollment consisting of foreign students. To date, the district has enrolled 30 students from 19 countries, including France, Korea, Russia, and Vietnam. District families provide housing for the foreign students, who pay \$4,000 for boarding costs. Total enrollment for the 2011-12 academic year is expected to be between 95 and 100.

### Benefits

According to Hults, the program has several benefits. It is cost neutral to taxpayers, because tuition students use facilities and staff resources already available in the tiny community. In addition, because fixed costs are stable, the annual cost per student has dropped dramatically as tuition payments increase the revenue line for the district's budget. Tuition for international students is currently \$4,000 per year.

Because of its remoteness, the district makes extensive use of technology to provide a well-rounded educational program. Distance-learning facilities are used in cooperation with the regional Board of Cooperative Educational Services district to offer expanded course offerings. These resources allow students to participate in Advanced Placement courses, such as calculus, that typically would not be available in such a small district.

District classrooms are equipped with interactive, touch-activated

white boards. Both teachers and students access computers during class. In addition, the building has four computer laboratories for student use.

Newcomb students can earn a New York State Regents high school diploma. Those desiring a more challenging experience are eligible to participate in a partnership with the North Country Community College. Through this new program, students can earn an associate degree from the college. The district also operates a community education program that offers activities for all ages focusing on academics, athletics, and crafts.

Hults explains that Newcomb students have a valuable opportunity to learn about different cultures by socializing with their foreign counterparts. An added benefit to the program is the potential for developing lifetime international friendships. When students return to their countries of origin, they keep in touch with their U.S. host families, students, and friends through Skype and other social networking tools. After graduation, many international students return to the U.S. to attend college. Some of their families even have purchased vacation homes in the Newcomb area.

Hults plans to grow his program to include 50 foreign students as well as 50 additional students from U.S. urban centers. He believes that some urban families may want to give their children a high-quality education while living in a small, close-knit community with abundant opportunities to enjoy outdoor sports and wilderness experiences.

### Limitations and obstacles

Although plans to expand are exciting for the community, limitations exist. One formidable obstacle is insufficient student housing. In this small community, only a limited number of host families are available.

Hults seeks to overcome this obstacle by collaborating with local

authorities and investors to develop student accommodations. For example, investors from Thailand are in negotiations to purchase a 40-acre parcel of land with a pond and a spectacular view of the surrounding mountains adjacent to the school property. The plan is to attract students from Asia and Europe.

Another obstacle for international students is the one-year limitation on student visas issued by the U.S. State Department. According to federal regulations, foreign students attending high school in the U.S. must obtain an F1 visa that is valid for only 12 months. In addition, this visa requires that foreign students pay all tuition expenses.

Although private individuals or organizations may sponsor students, the youths are still required to demonstrate financial capability to pay tuition and living expenses. Subsidies from a school district or other public funds are strictly prohibited. The Newcomb Central School District is working with federal legislators to remove these visa limitations.

Newcomb was creative in capitalizing on its assets. Officials marketed their mountain environment, ecology focus, and quality educational program to the world community. Consider the unique characteristics of your community. You too may have resources that can be of special interest to international students looking for an authentic American experience while completing their education.

Tuition students may offer you a valuable mechanism to enhance your school community and bolster your revenues. Make an offer they can't refuse—the world is waiting. ■

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## Making the Rules

*Governance is a team sport, but beyond the basics, no clear guidelines exist. You and your board can seize the opportunity to craft more meaningful governance roles for strong leadership*

**I**n my younger days as a community college president in Cleveland, I oversaw the office of the college board of trustees. I had an invaluable opportunity early in my career to work closely with the governing body of a major educational institution. The lessons I learned over my five years at the college have served me well as a consultant to public and nonprofit organizations in the governance arena.

One of the most important lessons I learned is that the work of governing a public or nonprofit organization—be it a school district, college, hospital, or public transportation authority—is by its very nature a team effort. The process of making strategic and policy-level decisions and judgments is so complex that no school board could possibly govern effectively on its own without a close partnership with its superintendent and senior administrators. Their collaboration and support are essential for effective decision-making.

A second lesson came along with the first: Governing may be a team sport, but it is without clear rules. This makes building a rock-solid district governing team a challenge. I was thinking about this as I watched the French Open final. Imagine playing a tennis match without hard and fast rules about such basics as when a shot is in or out, when you change sides, how you keep score, or

what constitutes a foot fault when serving. Chaos, right? Welcome to the world of public school governance.

Sure, some fundamental rules for the governing game exist, such as how school board members are elected, the terms they serve, when posting a meeting is necessary, and what constitutes a quorum. But when you get into complex governing processes such as strategic planning, annual budget development, and educational performance monitoring, no detailed, universally accepted guidelines exist for you to follow.

Every time I present a workshop involving school board members and district administrators, someone asks me to explain the division of labor between the school board and superintendent in a particular area, like operational planning. Every time, I disappoint more than a few participants by saying, "Well, you've got to work that out based on experience, but there's no way you can draw a solid line with your school board's role on one side, and the superintendent and senior administrators' on the other."

### Budget roles

Over the past 25 years as a governance writer and consultant, I've learned that annual budget preparation is one of the most complex and contentious facets of the governing game. On one hand,

adopting your district's annual budget is one of the most important governing decisions that your board can make. You are allocating district resources to myriad educational and administrative functions and establishing operating targets that your board can use to measure district effectiveness.

On the other hand, in normal economic times, unless you anticipate a huge infusion of new resources, such as a multimillion dollar grant from the federal government or the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, or a capital construction bond levy, next year's budget will probably look like this year's, at least insofar as allocating dollars is concerned.

The fact is, most of your district's major costs already are allocated—to faculty compensation, buildings and grounds maintenance, and the like. Of course, tough economic times over the past three or so years have meant that many school boards have been significantly cutting their budgets, but this is the exception to the rule. When the recovery is well under way, you can expect your board's role in budget decision-making to settle back into a familiar pattern.

So what is your board's role in the annual budget process when things get back to normal, economically speaking? One district I worked with a few years ago came up with a creative answer, under the leadership of the board's new planning committee. This committee was formally responsible for designing—in close partnership with the superintendent and senior administrators—and overseeing the board's role in annual operational planning and budget preparation.



Board members were tremendously frustrated by the existing process. It engaged the board at the tail-end of budget preparation, when there was nothing for the board to do but thumb through a massive, highly complex, finished document. The rule had been in place for years: The budget was essentially the responsibility of the superintendent and senior administrators. The board was not involved until the budget had been produced. This rule had to be rewritten.

The current year's budget already had been put to bed, but with a new fiscal year quickly approaching, the new planning committee worked with the superintendent and senior administrators to craft a more meaningful board role in budget preparation in the new fiscal year.

#### High-level early guidance

The board committee met with the superintendent and four top administrators in work sessions to carve out this new role. The group quickly reached consensus that, in the upcoming fiscal year, the school board should provide high-level guidance early in the process of preparing the annual budget for the following year, before any dollars had been allocated.

The board-savvy superintendent took the lead in coming up with the design of what was ultimately called the "pre-budget operational issues work session."

In a nutshell, the whole board would spend the better part of a Saturday early in the upcoming fiscal year, meeting with the superintendent and his top lieutenants. They would focus on identifying key operational issues that would be highlighted in the budget document.

This first process, which became an annual operational planning event, was an unqualified success. As it played out, each of the associate superintendents (responsible for such functions as curriculum and instruction, pupil services, human resources, athletics, and build-

ings and grounds) made a formal presentation. They covered their area's mission, current objectives, performance over the past year, and important operational issues that appeared to merit close board attention.

#### The role of structure

It's important to note that well-designed board standing committees can be very useful vehicles for working out the ongoing division of labor in key governing areas, such as planning and performance monitoring.

In my real-life example, the planning committee worked closely with the superintendent and senior administrators in coming up with a process for creative, front-end board involvement in the annual budget preparation process.

It would have been extremely difficult to achieve the same result by the superintendent's coming to the full board with a proposed approach for board involvement. It was much easier to divide the labor away from the formal setting of a regular board business meeting.

The lack of rules in the game of governing can be seen as a barrier to successful school leadership. However, the void also gives you and your board an opportunity to get creative in crafting your own governance rules. ■

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Doug Eadie (doug@dougheadie.com) is founder and CEO of Doug Eadie & Company. A contributing editor to *ASBJ*, he is the author of 18 books on board and CEO leadership.

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### ADVISER

# What Would You Do If ...

## Parents wanted to fire a coach with a losing record?

**A** longtime varsity basketball coach at an urban high school had a reputation as an inspiring teacher and a great guy. In the past five years, however, his team had a losing record. Some parents and community members were pressuring the superintendent and the school board to fire this coach and replace him with someone who could produce a winning season. Parents complained that their students were missing out on scholarship opportunities because of the team's poor performance. Some school board members thought this attitude of "win at any cost" was misguided, and that the coach put teaching above competition. Other members agreed with the parents. What should this board do?

■ The only employee the school board should be evaluating is the superintendent. ... Coaches, even though they may be a stipend position rather than a full-time employee, should be held accountable by their immediate supervisor, typically the high school principal or athletic director. A review of the board's policies to ensure the expectations of any extracurricular activity is certainly within the purview of the board, but as to whether or not the coach is meeting those expectations [the decision] rests within the authority of the administration. While it is often difficult for board members not to get involved in these types of decisions it really isn't their job, and they should have the strength to stay out of it.

*Nicholas D. Caruso Jr., Senior Staff Associate for Field Services and Technology, Connecticut Association of Boards of Education*

■ I strongly support the idea of "the board has one employee—the superintendent." That is, everyone else in the system works for the superintendent. A wise board will not want to interject itself into the relations between the superintendent and his or her staff—in this instance the principal and basketball coach.

At the same time, how does the superintendent

know if he or she has the right employee for this important part of the school's athletic program? It depends on what benefits the school expects to receive from its investment in basketball. This is the key board question: What does our community want from our sports program? The board serves the superintendent—as well as the staff, students and community—by providing an answer to this foundational question. The answer is likely some mix of school reputation, team building and cooperative learning, character development, co-curricular opportunities, and nurturing excellence. How the board weighs these and other values can be expected to shape the work of the coach. Is he the right person? That's a superintendent question. Is the program working? That's a board question, which can only be answered with helpful policy in place.

*John J. Cassel, Director of Field Services, Illinois Association of School Boards*

**Advice for the asking:** If you are plagued with a prickly problem of school board service or school governance, ask ASBJ. We'll change the names of persons and places. Then, we'll describe the problem and its suggested solution for our readers. Write: Adviser, *American School Board Journal*, 1680 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314. Or send us an e-mail at [adviser@asbj.com](mailto:adviser@asbj.com), marked "Adviser." Adviser does not represent official policy of the National School Boards Association, nor should it be construed as legal advice.





## READINGS AND REPORTS

# From accessing higher ed to third-grade reading



### Accessing higher education [www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org)

The financial aid policies of colleges and universities, states, and the federal government do not expand, but rather limit, access to higher education for low-income youth. *Priced Out*, a new report from The Education Trust, says that the average low-income family will end up paying or borrowing an amount equal to 72 percent of its annual income each year that it sends one child to a four-year college. This represents the “net price” of a college education: the amount families must pay after grant aid.

### Benefits and the workforce [www.aflac.com](http://www.aflac.com)

The *2011 Aflac WorkForces Report* says that 54 percent of America’s workforce would accept a new job at a lower salary if that job had better benefits, and 42 percent said that a well-communicated benefits program would make them less inclined to look for a new job. However, 66 percent said their human resources department is not or is only somewhat effective at benefits communications. Fifty-three percent of workers said they will be looking for a new job in the coming year.

### Condition of Education <http://nces.ed.gov>

The National Center for Education Statistics’ *Condition of Education 2011* says that 49 percent of elementary school teachers and 54 percent of high school teachers held postgraduate degrees in 2007-08, compared to 43 percent and 50 percent in 1999-2000. Dropout rates for whites, blacks, and Latinos all declined between 1980 and 2009. The percentage of white students decreased from 68 percent to 55 percent between 1989 and 2009, while the percentage of Latino students doubled from 11 to 22 percent.

### Graduation rate improves [www.edweek.org](http://www.edweek.org)

The graduation rate jumped almost three percentage points from 2007 to 2008 after declining for two years, and now stands at 72 percent, the highest it has been since the 1980s. *Diplomas Count 2011*, a new report from *Education Week*, says that graduation rates have increased by at least two percentage points for all ethnic groups; graduation rates improved most rapidly among black students. Eighty-three percent of Asian-Americans, 78 percent of whites, 58 percent of Latinos, 57 percent of blacks, and 54 percent of Native Americans graduated.

### Latino graduates [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

U.S. Census Bureau data show a 12 percent rise in the number of Latino high school graduates from 2000 to 2008. *School Enrollment in the United States: 2008* reports that in 2008 only 22 percent of Latino 18- to 24-year-olds lacked a high school diploma or its equivalent, or were not enrolled in high school, compared to 34 percent in 1998. Latino enrollment in two-year colleges was up 85 percent from 2000 levels. An enrollment record was set in 2008, with 18.6 million students enrolled in college.

### Reauthorizing ESEA [www.edexcellencemedia.net](http://www.edexcellencemedia.net)

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute’s *ESEA Briefing Book* identifies issues that policymakers must resolve before the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) can be reauthorized. The issues include: the definition of college and career readiness; required achievement standards, or “cut scores;” growth measures; science and history assessments; school ratings (Adequate Yearly Progress); interventions; measuring and ensuring teacher effectiveness; comparability of services; and allowing more flexibility to states and districts in adhering to the law’s requirements.

### Restructuring RESOURCES to raise student achievement <http://erstrategies.org>

*Restructuring Resources for High-Performing Schools* from Education Resource Strategies says that the current financial crisis and a widespread push for school reform provide a unique opportunity for state policymakers to make big changes at the local level. The report recommends that states move now to make money-saving policy changes to the organization of people and time (eliminate class size requirements and mandated staffing ratios); special education (implement early intervention and revise funding formulas); state



# 10 ways to improve your P.E. program



SPARK, a research-based public health organization of the San Diego State University Research Foundation, issued these tips for making good programs even better:

**1.** Focus on lifelong activities rather than team or individual sports. Weight training, running, yoga, and aerobics tend to be carried over to adulthood more often than other competitive sports like football, basketball, and soccer.

**2.** Include physical activities that children enjoy. Teach them activities they like so much that they want to do them at recess and at home. Emphasize “fun” over “exercise.”

**3.** Purchase assessment tools such as pedometers and heart rate monitors. They help educators track student progress, and kids enjoy tracking the number of steps or miles they walk.

**4.** Break into smaller groups. P.E. class is one area where it's possible to break the class into smaller groups of four to six children per group, making it easier for kids to work on building their social skills.

**5.** Provide weight and resistance training classes and equipment. More

middle and high schools are offering weight training classes, teaching a skill that kids often carry into adulthood.

**6.** Include activities for all students. Some children have developmental or physical disabilities that make it harder for them to participate. Provide a variety of activities that allow everyone to be involved.

**7.** Provide professional development for P.E. teachers. They need continuing education to keep them up-to-date on everything from new lesson plans to current health and nutrition information.

**8.** Take a holistic approach to wellness and well-being. Creating healthy children with good habits isn't limited to physical education. P.E. classes can broaden the variety of topics to include healthy lifestyles.

**9.** Integrate health and nutrition programs into P.E. classes. They are just as important to healthy lifestyles and lifelong wellness and physical activity and movement.

**10.** Provide assessment initiatives. Evaluate students' levels of fitness so you can identify successes and areas that need improvement.

funding systems (move to weighted student funding systems); and district data and reporting (use suggested “power metrics” to make district reporting more meaningful).

## Social media's impact on kids

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org>

More than half of all teens use a social media site at least once a day. A new report from the American Academy of Pediatrics, *The Impact of Social Media Use on Children, Adolescents and Families*, offers a rundown on the latest social media research and advises parents and their kids on ways to navigate this new world. The report advises parents to close their own “participation gap” by learning how to use social media themselves, and recommends supervising children's online experiences actively, rather than depending on monitoring software.

## Soldiers' deployment and student achievement

[www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org)

Students whose parents are deployed for 19 months or longer have modestly lower achievement scores than cohorts whose parents have been deployed for less time or have not been deployed. A new study from the Rand Corporation, *Effects of Soldiers' Deployment on Children's Academic Performance and Behavioral Health*, says that, the longer parents are deployed, the greater the negative effects on their children's academic achievement and behavior. Elementary and middle school students are shown to be particularly vulnerable to the effects of deployment.

## Talking to kids about sexting

[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)

A new tip sheet for parents from the American Academy of Pediatrics about kids and social media, *Talking to Kids and Teens about Social Media and Sexting*, recommends keeping the family computer in a public part of the home, finding out what platforms



friends are using, checking chat logs and social networking profiles, setting time limits for Internet usage, and creating a system to monitor children's online usage—then following through.

### Teacher quality in L.A.

[www.nctq.org](http://www.nctq.org)

Only 52 percent of students in California's Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) graduate on time. Statewide, 70 percent of all students graduate on time. A report from the National Council on Teacher Quality, *Teacher Quality Roadmap: Improving Policies and Practices in LAUSD*, says that, to turn the district around, it needs to improve teacher recruitment, pre-screening, and staffing practices; evaluate teachers regularly on multiple measures, including student achievement; and make tenure more meaningful, including changing the current practice of offering it after two years of teaching.

### Test-based incentive programs ineffective

[www.nap.edu](http://www.nap.edu)

A new report from the National Research Council, *Incentives and Test-Based Accountability in Education*, says programs that sanction or reward schools, teachers, or students based on test performance do not consistently or significantly raise student achievement. School-level incentives such as those used by No Child Left Behind yield the largest incentive gains, but even the largest gains measure around 0.08 standard deviations, the equivalent of moving performance from the 50th percentile to the 53rd percentile. Data also indicate that high school exit exams effectively reduce high school graduation rates.

### Third-grade reading and graduation rates

[www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org)

Low-income students who do not read proficiently by third grade are at great risk of not graduating, or not graduating

on time, according to *Double Jeopardy*, a new report from The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Twenty-six percent of low-income, low-proficiency readers fail to graduate high school by age 19, compared to 22 percent of low-income children overall, and 6 percent of children

who have never experienced poverty. The statistics are most grim for black and Latino students who are not proficient readers by third grade. ■

Compiled by Margaret Suslick, ASBJ's Editorial Assistant.

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Anne L. Bryant

## Working together we can get better

**R**ecent news stories seem to imply that civil wars between teachers unions, state legislatures, and governors are under way in several states. I'm concerned that these stories oversimplify the issues, and that school boards and local governance could be injured by the cross-fire.

We see in some places that both sides feel embattled. Legislators' attempts to gain flexibility in work rules that might actually benefit teachers and students—and give much-needed relief to local budgets—could be cast as undoing protections that teachers unions feel are necessary.

To become leaders of school reform,

teachers unions must be full partners with school boards, asking the tough questions, discarding old rules, and setting up processes instead of protecting or defending teachers who are not contributing to our mutual goal of stu-

dent achievement and success.

But neither can we—as leaders of school systems, board members and teacher leaders—attack one another. Attacking a teachers union could be compared to attacking NSBA or a state school boards association because a school board is not operating perfectly. Blaming organizations will not solve problems.

Are there some school boards that are less effective? Yes. But NSBA and our state associations are in the business of helping boards to get better, and in many

cases they do. Are there poor teachers who have a negative effect on children? Absolutely. And to deal with that, we need to change the less effective rules and regulations and create policies and processes to enable good teachers to grow and develop, provide mentors for new teachers, and build strong evaluation systems that will help improve performance. And when poor teachers can't improve, we need to remove them.

There is an effort to tackle issues around evaluation systems and performance, but we also know that some local unions and state organizations do not follow what their national organizations preach.

How can school boards help?

We know great teachers love their subject matter and inspire their students. We also know teachers leave the field for a variety of reasons, often because of the culture and climate in their schools. Surveys tell us they may need more time to plan; more time to work with other teachers to improve their craft; or they want more respect from each other, and from students, parents, and administrators. This culture of learning and growth is one that school boards can truly zero in on, and there's good research showing that strong school board policies make a difference.

The report *Beyond Islands of Excellence* is as relevant today as it was when the Learning First Alliance published it in 2003. Its findings are simple: School boards, administrators, and teachers must be in alignment around the issues of professional development and professional learning communities. A leading element in NSBA's *Key Work of School Boards*, which was first published in 1999, challenges school boards

to create a culture where teachers love teaching and students love to learn.

School boards must consider these climate issues as we create 21st century teaching and learning environments. Today, in addition to all of their other roles, teachers must be fluent with the latest technologies and they must inspire their students to be creative, be critical thinkers, and understand project-based learning.

Are our current evaluation systems and rewards systems adequate for these new duties? Not nearly. So school boards must ask, how can we create truly effective teacher evaluation systems?

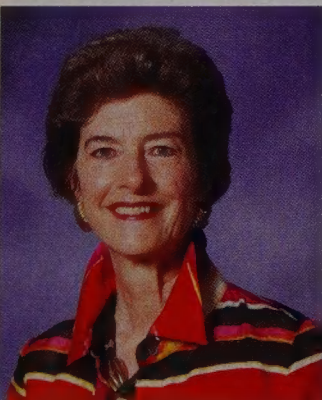
Shanghai, China, boasts the world's top PISA scores. Their teacher evaluations use simple and fair tools: student and parent surveys, peer reviews, administrator surveillance of teaching, and the teacher's self-reflections. But also inherent in Shanghai's system is a respect and trust for the teaching profession, and an understanding that what parents and students want probably will improve student learning.

So do we need to change the way we think about the preparation of teachers, professional development, evaluation, and compensation? Absolutely.

We've seen many districts get it right, where teachers and administrators work together to ensure the climate for teaching and learning ties into student achievement. These districts connect goals for learning and achievement to processes and systems. The school board focuses on critical tasks such as budget alignment, community engagement, and full accountability to parents and the community. And effective boards always ask, "How can we get better?"

Does this sound like the Key Work of School Boards? Bingo! ■

Anne L. Bryant (abryant@nsba.org) is the executive director of NSBA and the publisher of *ASBJ*.

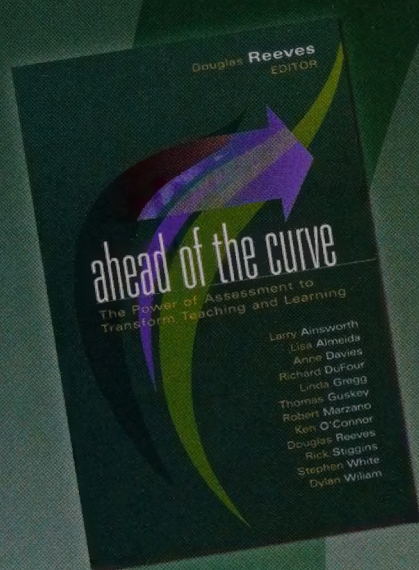




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